My Lady of the South

RANDALL PARRISH

Gerald Elbert
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Harriett Keyser.

MY LADY
OF
THE SOUTH

By MR. PARRISH

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"I don't in the least want to like you," Jean replied, "but I do."

MY LADY OF THE SOUTH

A Story of the Civil War

By RANDALL PARRISH

Author of "My Lady of the North," "When Wilderness Was King," "A Sword of the Old Frontier," etc.

With Frontispiece
By ALONZO KIMBALL

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MY LADY OF THE SOUTH

CHAPTER I

LEFT WOUNDED ON THE FIELD

I NOW recall our part in the battle merely in a series of detached pictures, having dull, blank spaces between. Nevertheless, how vividly bright with color each separate scene photographed itself upon the retina of the eye. I remember our battery first going into action along the western edge of the old cemetery, among the billowy graves, the cracked, overturned stones; I recall the mass of green leaves, checkered by red blossoms, where the vine clambered over the large monument at our rear, and how I entangled my foot in the creepers and nearly fell. I shall never forget the ghastly white face of Rosecrans's aide, his long brown beard blown backward by force of the wind, as he came furiously spurring up the road, his head bare, his hand pointing forward, screaming out his orders; I remember the wild clang and turmoil as our startled horses plunged to the left, dragging after them the black guns, with muzzles still smoking grimly, on a mad, reckless gallop down into the shelter of a shallow ravine, splashing through the running water, and dashing in headlong impetuosity up the sharp incline of the oppo-

site bank. I heard the wild yells of the excited drivers, the blows, the crunching of heavy wheels over the stones; I saw the leap of the caissons, the rush of the men. Panting for breath, stumbling over the rough ground, I raced beside Number Two for the crest, vaguely wondering why Wyatt was lashing his leaders so like a demon. I saw Somers go tumbling forward in a shapeless heap, and one of the straining wheelers on Number One drop dead in the traces, dragged remorselessly onward by his teammates. Yet I was there, my hands hard on the spokes, sluing the heavy guns into position, the very instant the released caissons were trotted to the rear down the protecting slope. Then it instantly became all clockwork, mechanism, discipline. I could scarcely distinguish faces or even forms; all was rush, riot, seeming confusion; yet I knew it must be Keane to right of me and Parkhurst at left. A sharp order hurtled into my numbed brain, and I echoed it automatically even as I heaved, the hot perspiration blinding my eyes, the mad lust of the fight throbbing through my veins. With one bound backwards I was at the breech, the slim muzzle deflected downward into the valley. I marked the vague figure of a man, unrecognizable, spring hastily back from the mouth of the gun, crouching down, rammer in hand; over that deadly smooth barrel I caught one glimpse of low tangled bushes, of drifting smoke clouds, of a solid gray mass breaking through, of sunlight shimmering along a front of levelled steel — then I jerked the lanyard, and mingled smoke and flame burst forth. All that followed was pandemonium, rush, roar, leaping, shapeless figures. I could

perceive nothing clearly; all I remember was that we were firing canister, the deflected guns leaping madly back with the recoil, growing hot to the hand. I trod on bodies as I toiled; I heard through the stifling volume of smoke, the infernal uproar, a hoarse shouting of unrecognizable orders, the wild scream of a wounded horse, a single mad oath, an agonized voice yelling from behind, "Where in hell is the infantry?" Yet all that I actually realized then were those distorted black shapes springing back and forth from that gun muzzle, and the lanyard grasped in my hand. That alone was my work, my duty, and I must stand to it until I died. Two years of iron discipline had made me into a machine.

Something burned my shoulder like a sudden spurt of flame; I felt sick from the shock, and clung desperately to the breech to keep from falling; I saw faces here and there amid the brown whirls of smoke, strange, unknown repulsive faces, rendered hideous from the strain of conflict; my gun toppled over, one wheel smashed into splinters; I saw Wyatt turn and run for the rear, and Parkhurst flung backward as though shot from a catapult; I jerked the rammer out of his dead, clutching hands, and began striking fiercely at that crush of gray figures leaping toward me. Then everything went blank, and I pitched over under the wreck.

It was dark when I slowly reopened my eyes, and endeavored to look about, dark and still, except for a faint gleam of distant stars, and the awful gurgling of some desperately wounded man lying not far away. My head throbbed feverishly from pain, and my right side ached

horribly as I first attempted to move my body. Above me was the black breech of the gun, and my extended hand touched the single wheel upholding it, the spokes ragged from splinters. It hurt me so desperately to turn over that I remained motionless for a long time, staring straight up at the sky, listening intently for each sound, and endeavoring to think. In a measure the situation soon became sufficiently clear — that fierce charge of the enemy had reached us unchecked, and we had lost the guns. Of this there could be no doubt; but what more? Had we also lost the battle?

How deadly still the night was; not a shot echoing anywhere, not a footstep, not a voice; only that awful gurgling breathing yonder to the left. One of my feet pressed against a body, and I moved it carefully, although even this slight action resulted in a sharp twinge of pain. I could perceive another form huddled in a shapeless heap against the wheel, and, as my hand reached out groping toward the right, it touched an ice-cold face. Someway my ordinarily reckless nerve had totally deserted me, and I drew back shuddering, a nameless fear clutching at my heart. I was afraid to ascertain the truth. Had I been badly injured? Was I crippled for life? To my mind that would have been far worse than death, and had ever been my dread in battle. Now I feared the reality had reached me. At length, mustering sufficient courage for the effort, my teeth clinched in final determination to know the worst, I endeavored to feel along my side where the twinges of pain seemed most severe, but only to discover my rough woollen shirt stiff from congealed blood.

My lips were dry and cracked, my tongue parched and swollen. Suddenly, in the stillness, I distinguished the sound of some one approaching, and sank down again, motionless, listening.

They came slinking toward me from out the night much as jackals might, creeping along from body to body, mumbling to each other as they groped around in the darkness, occasionally lifting their heads to listen like hunted wild beasts. I recognized them instantly as the scourge of the battlefield; human scavengers, foul vultures, whatever uniform they might wear to hide their crime, midnight robbers of the dead. I lay there silent, almost breathless from the clutch of sudden terror, in my covert beneath the dismantled gun, while they swiftly rifled the pockets of that shapeless, hideous thing upheld by the wheel. They saw me lying there plainly enough, but nearer at hand were victims far easier of approach, and so they slunk growlingly past, leaving me unmolested. Yet I distinguished enough of their profane speech to render the situation clear. Our army had been pressed relentlessly back, driven pell-mell across the river in disorderly retreat, and the victorious forces of the Confederacy held the field. I stared up at the pitiless stars, perspiration beading my forehead, my teeth clinched from despair and pain. With the first coming of another dawn details would search the field to collect the wounded; they would discover me lying there helpless, and hold me prisoner. A single shot rang out far to my right, and the black figure of one of those skulking vultures went slinking past on a run, stumbling in his haste over the dead bodies. Already sentries dili-

gently watched, and with the coming of daylight the Confederate burial parties would be busy.

The very sound of that distant musket shot served to arouse me to action. Slowly, and with no little pain, I succeeded in creeping forth from beneath the gun shadow, and sat up. Perhaps my wounds were not really serious; I might be merely dazed from the blow on the head, weakened and fevered by loss of blood. My side still throbbed severely, it is true, yet my limbs were intact, and I managed to draw myself erect by grasping the spokes of the wheel, until I finally stood there faint and trembling. Nevertheless I realized my strength was coming back in response to movement, a fresh determination taking possession of my mind. I felt ready to endeavor, provided there remained anything to endeavor for. And why was there not? The Federal army could not be very far away; they would have rallied, and reformed their shattered lines by now; those bronzed fighting men I knew so well, as eager as ever to redeem themselves from the bitter sting of defeat. I must endeavor to join them, not lie here to run the risk of capture on the morrow. There would be some hiding-place near by into which I could crawl before the revealing dawn came; far better a long day of suffering and hunger than months, perhaps years, of hopeless imprisonment. Swaying weakly on my feet, I grasped the gun, endeavoring to peer about through the darkness. I could recall so little of the surroundings — there was the black shadow of a wood to my front, but the river would surely be in the opposite direction and the narrow stream we had crossed while coming into action must be

yonder to the left. I determined to creep down there anyway, for I must have water; my lips and throat were so dry I could not swallow. I made the endeavor on hands and knees, keeping well aloof from the numerous bodies, and crouching low as possible to escape the observation of any sentry near at hand. Thus I finally arrived at the edge of the bank, where the descent was steep, and slid silently down. Once beside the narrow stream I dipped my face in the running water, and drank greedily.

The cooling draught yielded me renewed life, and energy. Nothing about stirred; there was no sound excepting the murmur of the shallow stream at my feet, and the faint stir of leaves overhead. I tore aside the rough woollen artillery shirt I wore and attempted to explore the wound in my side; it was a jagged, ugly gash, evidently torn by a splinter, but not dangerously deep, although it had bled profusely. I washed it out as best I might with the cold water, gritting my teeth to the sharp pain, and finally fastening a silk handkerchief over the wound to prevent chafing. Some object moved along the opposite bank, a short distance down stream, and I crouched lower within the shadow, watching intently. But I saw nothing to alarm me further, even the slight sound of movement dying away. Suddenly I seemed to recall to memory the vague glimpse of a distant house far down the valley, half revealed as our battery dashed forward into position. Assuredly I had actually seen this; it was no dream. There would undoubtedly be found opportunity for concealment among the out-buildings, provided I could attain to their shelter before daybreak;

possibly for food also if any negroes yet remained there. Every inch of this open territory would be diligently searched for the wounded, and my sole chance for escape lay somewhere without the immediate zone of battle. I rubbed my forehead, endeavoring to recall more vividly the faint impression. It must have been two, perhaps three, miles distant, a large white house, almost completely surrounded by trees, and barely showing down the narrow gap of the valley. If I followed the stream I could scarcely go astray.

I struggled to my feet, experiencing a thrill of relief at the subsidence of pain, and the noticeable return of strength to my limbs. I was less seriously injured than I had at first believed, and this knowledge added immeasurably to my stock of hope and courage. Of Irish blood, ardent, combative, the very sense of surrounding danger became a stimulant. I stole silently down beneath the gloom of the bank shadow for possibly a hundred yards, scanning the opposite shore with anxious eyes, yet perceiving nothing calculated to alarm. Then I crept up to the level above, discovering there the faint traces of a road, which I followed, walking forward cautiously. There were numerous fires glowing redly some distance to the right, across the ploughed field, and I could hear a vigorous hammering on iron. Once I sank down into a shallow depression as three shadowy horsemen rode silently past, and, a little beyond, cautiously circled a broken-down army wagon, with a man sleeping peacefully underneath. Then the road led downward into the broadening valley, running through a black fringe of trees,

the gloom beneath the interlaced branches so dense I could scarcely discover the way, tripping continually over stumps and roots. It was a long two miles before I attained to the fragment of an enclosing rail fence, and could perceive the dark outlined shadow of a large shed beyond. However, the exercise of the tramp had served to strengthen my muscles, while the attendant excitement had completely swept away the cobwebs from my brain, the cool night air acting as a tonic. I had become a man once more, energetic, resourceful; no longer the wounded, aimless thing that had crept, weak, dizzy, and despairing, from beneath the wrecked gun. I took a long breath, peering about through the darkness, and then cautiously crept underneath the rails into the shed shadow.

CHAPTER II

IN WHICH I SEE AND HEAR

THE faintest tinge of approaching dawn was already in the sky, as yet scarcely perceptible, but enabling my eyes, trained by the long night vigil, to distinguish the dim outlines of my immediate surroundings. Slightly beyond the ramshackle old shed, in the protection of which I crouched, were visible several small log huts, closely grouped together, undoubtedly the negro quarters of the plantation. These appeared deserted, the door of the nearest standing wide open. A low picket fence, originally painted white, but now sadly demoralized, one section lying flat on the ground, served to separate this portion of the estate from the house lot, while a thick hedge of trees thoroughly concealed the mansion itself from view. But the smouldering embers of a camp-fire glowed sullenly directly in front of the covered entrance, and I could both perceive and hear the restless movement of horses tied to the veranda rail. Creeping cautiously forward as far as the fence barrier would permit, I was enabled to distinguish the shadowy figure of a sentry wearily pacing back and forth in front of the broad porch. Beyond all question some Confederate general officer had very sensibly appropriated the place for his headquarters, while his personal escort were encamped within the yard.

I made my way slowly back, all immediate hope of obtaining food dismissed from my mind. Greatly as I felt the need, the risk was too desperate. I had far better seek some safe corner within the old shed, sleep there quietly throughout the day if possible, and then try my luck the next night. Finding the door ajar, I crept in, discovering the interior well crowded with various implements of farm machinery, and other odds and ends, among the intricacies of which I slowly picked a path back into the farthest corner. Here a variety of empty barrels and boxes offered a fairly secure hiding-place, and I crawled into a niche next the wall, and thankfully snuggled down, watching the advancing daylight slowly turn the rough interior gray. Almost before I realized the possibility I was sound asleep.

Some unusual noise aroused me, yet when I first opened my eyes I possessed no conception as to how long I had been sleeping. It was still bright daylight, however, and I could perceive a bit of sunlight streaming in through a crack of the western side wall. For a moment or two I lay there puzzled, hearing nothing, and unable immediately to determine what it was which had awakened me so suddenly. Then I distinguished voices conversing, apparently not more than ten feet distant. Quietly as both parties spoke, their voices so subdued, indeed, as to render the words indistinguishable even at that distance, and in the silence, I was enabled to determine the speakers to be a young white woman and a negro. There was no mistaking the intonation of the latter, but the other voice was so low, vibrant with the soft idiom of the South, that

I lifted myself cautiously, peering out from behind the concealing boxes, in order that I might thus assure myself she was really white. The negro stood with his back toward me, a short, stockily built fellow, but bent somewhat by years and hard toil in the fields, his wool showing a dingy gray beneath the brim of his hat. By every outward token he was an old-time slave, to whom freedom would possess no vital meaning.

Just beyond his broad, bent shoulders appeared the features of a young girl, a most piquant face, marked now by trouble and perplexity, yet clearly reflecting a nature in which all the joy of life naturally predominated. I caught merely a glimpse, for I dared not brave disclosure, yet so deeply did that single glance impress me that, had I never been again privileged to see her, I could not have entirely effaced the memory. Scarcely more than eighteen years of age, rather slight of figure, still retaining the form of girlhood, less than medium height, standing firmly erect, every movement displaying unconscious grace and vigor, her face bright with intelligence, animated by every passing emotion, her cheeks flushed with health, her hair of darkest brown, fluffed carelessly back from off the low, broad forehead, her eyes the deepest unfathomable gray-blue, oddly shadowed by long lashes densely black, her lips full, red, and arched, speaking softly the pleasant idiom of the Southland. For a single moment she appeared to me a vision, fulfilling my dreams of young womanhood; then I awoke to the reality — that in fair rounded flesh, and pure red blood, she stood there, an

ideal surely, yet no less a living, breathing fact. My ears finally caught the words of the slave:

"But shorely, Miss Jean, I reckon I don't git dis jist straight, somehow. Why should n't ye do it, honey, when yo' pa an' Massa George both want ye to? Dat 's what I don't understan' nohow. Don't ye want ter marry Massa Calvert?"

The delicately arched mouth drew down severely, the blue-gray eyes drooping behind lowered lashes.

"I only wish I knew, Joe; I sure wish I knew," her soft voice filled with doubt. "I reckon I always expected to have to do this some day, but that never seemed so bad when it was a long way off. But now they insist it must be to-night, and — and it sure scares me."

"But don't ye love him, honey?"

The girl's eyes opened wide, gazing straight into the black, troubled face fronting her.

"I just don't know, Joe, that 's a fact; but — but I'm afraid not. He is just the same to me now as he was when we were children and played together. Sometimes I don't mind being with him, and then there are other times when I am actually afraid to have him near me. I don't think I ever really care whether he is here or not, and — and I do get awfully tired of him when he talks to me; he — he treats me like a little girl, and acts so superior. It almost makes me hate him." She put her hands up to her head, rumpling up the brown hair, a little pucker showing across her forehead. "He has been away most of the last two years, and — and, well, I have n't missed

him much! I know I have been lots happier here left alone."

"Ye shore have been happy 'nough," broke in the negro, soberly. "But ye shorely can't live yere alone no more for a while, Miss Jean. 'T ain't no laughing matter, far as I can see. De sojers was yere most ebery day, an' blame me if I can see which side was de worst, de Yanks or de Confeds. Dey steal, an' dey git drunk, an' dey fight, an' it wan't no fit place no longer fer any young gal to be all alone by herse'f, wid no one but an ol' nigger to look after her. It could be did, Missus, when dis country was peaceable like, but now de Lord only knows what 's goin' to happen next. Dis yere house would have been burnt to de groun' long afore dis if General Johnston had n't been a-living yere, an' now he 's gone. Ye know all dat, Miss Jean, an' it shore looks best to me what yo' pa an' Massa George wants ye fer to do."

"Do you like Calvert Dunn, Joe?"

"Well, maybe I don't exactly like him, Miss Jean," scratching the gray wool under the edge of his hat, and evidently puzzled how to answer diplomatically. "Ye see, he never done treated dis nigger ver' nice, dat 's a fact, fer shore. But I reckon it am just his way, an' he don't really mean nothin' by it, nohow. Anyhow he shore t'inks an almighty lot o' ye, Miss Jean, an' ye'd shore be perfectly safe where dey all live at Fairview, while yo' pa and Massa George was away a-fightin' agin de Yanks."

"The armies may come to Fairview yet, and there is no one there but old Judge Dunn and Lucille."

"An' ye don't believe nuffin' of de kind, honey. Dere 's half de field han's left dere; some of dem niggers don't know der is any war. Dem armies never will git over de mountains nohow, an' if dey does, de ol' Judge got a pow'ful lot o' fight left in him yit. I'd like to see de Yankee sojer what sets fut to his house, I shore would. It was de best place for ye to go to, child, anywhere in dese parts."

The girl sank down on a box, burying her face in her hands, and the negro stood helplessly looking at her, shifting uneasily from one foot to the other. Finally he blurted out,

"Ye shore ye don't want to marry Massa Calvert, Miss Jean?"

"Oh, really I don't know, Joe, I don't know," the soft voice trembling, the hands clasped. "I feel so different about it at some times than I do at others. I try to make myself realize that it is a duty, and that I am ungrateful not to yield to the wish of my people. Then occasionally he is so nice to me that I feel ashamed not to treat him better. But now, now when it comes to a final decision, and I know my whole future depends upon what I do, I experience a positive aversion for Calvert Dunn. I cannot express it rightly, but I possess no real confidence in the man; he does n't seem true to me, or manly. Besides, I feel as if I was being sold; as if my choice had nothing whatever to do with the matter. Choice!" She sprang to her feet with girlish impulsiveness, one hand pressing her temple. "I have been given no choice; they treat me like a child; they simply tell me I do not know my own

mind; that they are the better judges as to my future happiness. But I am the one who will have to live with him, Joe, and put up with his tantrums; and he has tantrums; I already know him well enough for that. And I have n't a soul to turn to, only you; I am all alone. They won't even talk to me, except to give their orders."

"Ye pore little gal," and the old negro's hand was unconsciously stroking her ruffled hair. "I shore wish I could help you, Miss Jean, I shore does, honey, but yo' pa an' Massa George am pow'ful hard men to deal wid when dey once git deir minds sot, an' dey am bofe sot on dis all right. Dey would jist about skin dis nigger alive if he kicked up any muss. I certainly don't tink dat Massa Calvert was onywhere near good 'nough for ye, Miss Jean, an' no more does Diana. We done talked dat over more nor once, but I don't pertend to set up my judgment agin yo' pa an' Massa George, honey. I reckon as how dey knows what am bes', an' dese am pow'ful dangerous times for a gal to live yere all alone. Was Massa Calvert comin' over yere to-night?"

"Yes; there is some early movement contemplated, and that has compelled them to force this matter. He has secured leave for thirty-six hours — just long enough to be married and carry me across the mountains to Fairview."

"An' what 'bout Diana an' me, Miss Jean? It 's shore goin' to be mighty lonely yere widout ye, honey."

She clasped the gnarled black hand between her soft palms.

"I know that, Joe, and there is very little for you to look after since that Yankee cavalry company ran off all

our stock; but I reckon you'll have to stay just the same, and keep the house until some of us get back again."

"Den ye're really a-goin', Miss Jean?"

"Yes, Joe, I'm going; there is no choice left me. They insist it is for the best, and have made all arrangements. Why, General Johnston's chaplain is waiting there in the house now, and Calvert is expected as soon as it is dark. I am almost ready to run away, if I only knew somewhere I could run to. I have n't any defence, even, for I do not know a thing against Calvert Dunn; so I've got to marry him," her voice choked, her handclasp tightening. "And — and, Joe, I know I'll be miserable, for I believe he is a cowardly brute."

"Ye does, honey?" in unmitigated astonishment at this sudden outburst.

"Yes, I do, although I hardly know why. I have not even dared to whisper it to myself before. It has been little things which have so prejudiced me against him; little mean, contemptible things no true man would ever be guilty of. Look how he lashed you across the face with his riding-whip; look how he shot that poor dog because it failed to retrieve to his liking; look how he sneered at me for binding up the poor thing's wounds. Such things show what he is, rather than his soft words and outward veneer of courtesy. Besides, what real man would ever insist on a girl's marrying him when he knows she would almost give her life to escape?"

"Does Massa Calvert know dat?"

"He does, if he understands the English language. I told him plainly enough, and he only laughed. He said

I was a child, and did n't know my own mind; then he endeavored to frighten me. Oh, Joe, Joe, if I only had some one I could go to for advice! But no one will even listen to me seriously. There does n't seem anything left me but to marry this man. Father and George both think so highly of him, they will not hear a word spoken against him. I simply had to talk with some one, Joe, and let out my heart; that 's why I came out here to you. Oh, I know you can't help me, but you're sorry for me, ain't you, old Joe? It helps just to know some one understands, and is sorry. I tell you, all the slaves in the South are not black, and I reckon it 's just as hard to be born free, and then sold, as any other way. I might have learned to like him if he had only come to me as a man should, striving to win me for himself, and treating me as if I possessed a mind and heart of my own; but no, he ignored me entirely, and appealed to papa and George, telling them of the danger I was in here,and of how valuable the two estates would be if joined together. That 's the way they have forced me along to the sacrifice — I'm sold for the price of the land."

"Ye pore little girl."

"Say poor little fool, rather," and she sprang to her feet, her cheeks burning with swift indignation. "I should have fought it, fought it; but all that is too late now. I am going, Joe; there is no use talking any longer, and so I am going to smile and look happy, and no one but you will ever know that I am not. You dear old black thing, you've been more like a father to me than any one else ever has. And I am going to have you and

Aunt Diana with me at Fairview just as soon as I can. It will be a comfort just to have you there to look at when my heart seems like breaking. And he'll break it, Joe; I know he will, for he cares for no one but himself."

She was gone, vanishing almost as a shadow might, leaving the speechless black staring after her, his outstretched hands trembling as from palsy. Slowly his head drooped forward, and for some moments he remained thus, the picture of utter despair.

"Pore little lamb! pore little lamb!" he kept saying over and over. "An' she am right 'bout it too; dat Massa Calvert am not de kind fer Miss Jean."

Then he passed out also, and I was left alone within the shed.

CHAPTER III

A MILITARY SECRET

MY interest in the situation thus oddly disclosed, awakened very largely, I must admit, by the extremely attractive personality of Miss Jean, and the deep, pathetic appeal in her soft voice, left me momentarily forgetful of my own unpleasant condition and requirements. Both parties to the dialogue had disappeared before I realized any personal necessity for action. By that time it was too late, as I durst not follow the retreating negro out into the open sunlight; nor did I feel, judging from the bitterness with which both he and the girl had referred to the Yankees, that this particular colored brother would prove very much inclined to assist one wearing my uniform. What, then, could be done? I reclined against a packing-case, with brain rested by sleep, reviewing the situation, and endeavoring to plan out some safe method of procedure. That I could in any way aid the young woman out of her present difficulty would have been a preposterous thought; interested I was, yet I had sufficient trouble on hand of my own. My wounds by this time gave me very little concern, and my mind was sufficiently clear and active. Except for some accident, escape ought not to prove so very difficult, although it was true I should be compelled to travel

through the night, largely by instinct, knowing almost nothing regarding roads, direction, or where Confederate pickets might be encountered. Still ordinary precaution ought to yield me passage, and the river itself would be a sufficient guide. If I only possessed some semblance of a Confederate uniform, the adventure would become much more simple, for in the confusion which must have followed the late engagement, there would be many scattered soldiers of all arms, wandering about, seeking their lost commands.

However, the first important and vital consideration was food, but that, as well as all else, must wait the coming of darkness. The sun had already disappeared behind the grove of trees in the west, and very soon, beneath the gathering gray of twilight, I ventured to creep forth from my covert and peer cautiously out through the partially opened door. There was a fire burning in the kitchen of the big plantation house, a heavily built negress bustling about busily within, her robust shadow clearly revealed by the reflection of the flames. This was probably Diana, and her affection for the Yankees was not apt to differ very widely from those of the others.

I must have watched her for fully ten minutes, unable to decide what I had better do, and becoming hungrier every second. The night shadows constantly deepened, and no alarming sound reached me from any direction. Finally Diana came forth on the back steps, holding a dish of something smoking hot in her hands, and began calling shrilly for Joe. There was no response. Muttering continually to herself, the negress passed across to the

second cabin and, disappearing for a moment, came forth again empty-handed, and returned to her labors. Evidently Joe's supper had been carried to him, but the important question in my mind just then was, where was Joe? If he had been there he would certainly have answered her call. If not there, then this was my one opportunity. I was far too desperate to hesitate long, and, in the thickening shadows, stole swiftly forward to the cabin which the negress had visited.

The door was latched, but had no lock; there was no sign of occupancy within, and a moment later I came hurriedly forth with what had been intended for Joe's supper, and bore it safely back, still hot and savory, to the shelter of the shed. It was a rasher of bacon and corn bread, ample in amount, admirably cooked, and I certainly enjoyed it to the very last crumb. At the close I hid the dish carefully and, now recklessly comfortable, felt amply prepared to face the adventures of the night.

There was no sound of horses' hoofs stamping in the front yard, nor could I perceive any sign of a pacing sentinel before the house. The guard of the night previous, whatever might be the cause, had very evidently been removed. I hardly know now why I first ventured in that direction, yet I skirted the low garden fence, where the night shadows were most dense, until I found myself crouching close against the latticed veranda. I stopped then suddenly enough, perceiving the figures of three men seated just beyond, evidently enjoying a quiet smoke after their evening meal. I might not have noticed their presence at all, but for the red glow of their cigars, as no

one of them spoke for several moments. Indeed, they remained silent and motionless for so long that I became nervous under the strain, half inclined to believe their dim outlines some illusion of the night. I had even drawn back cautiously for a foot or two, intending to make off down the road, when a peculiar deep voice gave utterance to a question, which as instantly stopped me with eagerly beating heart.

"Your news is not exactly clear to me, Chaplain. I understand you to say the plan is for McDermott's Division to take to the Minersville road at midnight, the others to follow along parallel lines hourly until daybreak?"

"Those are certainly Johnston's orders, Colonel Denslow. I distinctly heard them from his own lips, and was also present when his aides were sent out to the various division commanders."

"But nothing whatever has reached me, and we should naturally be third in line to follow McDermott, from our present position."

"Beyond doubt the orders to move are already at your headquarters. An orderly may be tearing down the road even now to recall you to camp. Your regiment is stationed to the left, just beyond the creek, is it not?"

"Yes," and the speaker, a tall, slender, yet broad-shouldered man, rose impatiently to his feet and gazed off in the direction indicated. "The Tenth Georgia Cavalry, Coulter's Brigade. I had no expectation of so hurried a movement. The Yankees are safely across the river entrenching, and all reports reaching us looked like

a week's reorganization, and then a direct attack on their position. What is Johnston up to?"

"A flank movement in force, before they can complete their entrenchments. He believes our army in fighting mood, encouraged by victory, and in far better condition than that of the enemy. He proposes to strike suddenly on their right flank, and crumple them up. He will leave all his camp-fires burning, both to-night and to-morrow night, so as to deceive the Federal scouts, fling his troops swiftly across the river before dawn Wednesday, and make the attack at daybreak. He expects to be in their camp before they are aware he has changed position. The success of the movement depends entirely on the promptness of the division commanders, and the condition of the roads. Our cavalry scouts report the plan perfectly feasible."

Colonel Denslow paced nervously back and forth across the broad veranda, the red glow of his cigar lighting up his face and revealing a closely trimmed gray beard.

"This sudden arrangement leaves me in rather a bad predicament," he confessed at last, pausing suddenly. "You know, of course, what you are here for to-night, Mordaunt, although I have not explained all the details; it is to marry my only daughter, Jean, to Lieutenant Calvert Dunn. The present condition of the country, and the danger involved in leaving a young girl here alone and unprotected, has hurried our arrangements, and prevented any formality. But Dunn has been detailed on Johnston's staff, and the Lord only knows where he may be now, if all you say is true. According to our plans he ought to

have been here an hour ago, but no doubt he is riding with orders, cursing his luck with every step of his horse, and utterly unable to send us any word to account for the delay. And what, under these circumstances, can I or my son do? Any minute an orderly may come dashing down the west road. That will mean we must depart at once and leave Jean Denslow here alone, absolutely alone, with only an old negro and his wife on the place. Besides, if Johnston succeeds in his plan, and routs the Yankees by striking them on the right flank, this plantation is likely to be in the direct line of their retreat. Great God, man! do you comprehend all that will mean to the girl? Here alone, defenceless, in the track of a beaten army! By Heaven, I would risk my commission rather than desert her to such a fate."

There was a hush, during which I could clearly distinguish the heavy breathing of the three men. Then the softer voice of the Chaplain asked,

"But what particular difference at this time would her marriage to Dunn make?"

"He intended to take her immediately, as his wife, across the mountains to Fairview. It is not very far away, yet so situated as to be out of the track of both armies, in an isolated valley among the hills. His father and sister are there. They would have ridden the distance to-night, and by to-morrow morning she would be in perfect safety."

"But why not have your son ride with her to this haven of refuge? He is here by permission of his superior officer, no doubt, and, if he started before any orders of recall

reached him, no harm could result. By hard riding he might even be back to take his command in time for the proposed attack; and surely Lieutenant Dunn's people would receive and protect your daughter, even if the marriage had not already taken place."

The younger man, seemingly little more than a stripling, was on his feet now also, flinging his cigar into the grass.

"I could do it, father," he exclaimed eagerly. "Jean rides as well as any man, and I could be back in Minersville in forty-eight hours. Shall I go?"

"If necessary, yes, George, but we will wait here until the last possible moment in the hope that Dunn may appear. My heart is set on the consummation of this marriage, Chaplain; it has been the cherished plan of our families ever since the birth of Calvert and Jean, not only because it will unite us all more closely, who have been neighbors more than a hundred years, but because our plantations touch each other, and will form one magnificent property after the war. Jean, I regret to say, has been the one obstacle in the way heretofore — she is somewhat headstrong and filled with girlish notions — but she has at last consented to do as we wish, and I am actually afraid to permit her any opportunity for reconsideration. She is a strange girl, and I never know what her mood may be. Once the ceremony is over I shall feel safe, but not before. George, you had better see that the horses are saddled and ready; we will wait for Dunn till the last possible moment. If the orderly comes first, my boy, you are to ride away with your sister before you hear his or-

ders. Have your horses tied there in the fence corner, and Jean dressed for the journey."

I slowly drew back from my position as George disappeared around the opposite side of the house. I was a soldier, and had become possessed of an important military secret, which every sense of my duty to my cause compelled me to bear to Rosecrans if possible. The slightest delay might prove disastrous; yet how was I to accomplish the work in time to be of value? I was well within the Confederate lines, on foot and a fugitive, my ragged uniform sure to betray me to any challenging sentinel. I comprehended something now of the lay of the land, the situation of the two armies, and the direction of the contemplated movement. If I only possessed a horse and a Confederate uniform, I might discover a passage and arrive in time with my message of warning to prevent a grave disaster. Those horses tied to the fence corner! George was there, and probably the negro Joe as well, and they were so close to the house the slightest sound of a struggle would be heard instantly. That would mean four against one, the four armed. The orderly! Ay, there was a possible chance he would come riding down that road from the west alone, unsuspecting danger. And he would surely come, if what the Chaplain said was true. Any moment now we might hear the hoof-beats of his horse echoing through the darkness. It was a black, cloudy night, intensely still, and I would need to get some distance away before any attack on the speeding messenger would be safe. Yet, could I once succeed in way-

laying him alone, I felt little fear as to the results of the encounter. I was young, strong, long inured to fighting, and besides would possess all the advantage of surprise. I reached my decision as a soldier, with no other consideration in mind than the plain duty which this emergency brought. The training and discipline of years all combined to urge me forward in forgetfulness of self.

I crawled back along the fence shadow, grasping, as I passed, a loosened picket for a weapon, and pausing long enough behind the shed to fashion it so as to fit my hand. Then I walked boldly down the road to the westward. The gloom of the night was so dense I had to feel the ruts with my feet, yet I had travelled that way before through the darkness, and remembered some of the peculiarities of the path. Not far beyond the corner which I judged marked the limits of the Denslow plantation, the road dipped sharply over a rocky bank, and descended into the narrow valley of the creek. This appeared to me a spot well fitted for an ambuscade, and I came to a halt, leaning against a stunted tree, listening anxiously. The time had already become most precious. The remaining hours of the night might be ample for my purpose, if I only knew the surrounding country better, and could thus find my course directly to the Federal camp. But the chances were I should have to ride many a useless mile seeking to get free from the enemy's lines before reaching our pickets. Every moment of darkness I could gain would add immeasurably to my chances of success. It seemed as if night had never before been so still; not even the slightest sound of life reached me; no rustle of

leaves, and barely the faintest tinkle of distant water. Overhead not so much as a single star was visible, and, as I glanced uneasily behind, no gleam of light shone forth from any window of the great house. I was so thoroughly alone the silence strained my nerves and aroused my imagination. Mine was not by any means a pleasant position, now that I had leisure to reflect upon it — I was upon the very edge of the battlefield, well within the Confederate lines; where their sentries were posted, their pickets placed, I could not even guess, only I might rest assured no open road would be neglected. Yet, if any were near, the orderly certainly would be challenged as he rode toward me, and any such sound of warning must reach me from a long distance amid the stillness.

I must have distinguished the approach of that horse's hoofs fully a mile away,— first the faint ring of steel on an exposed stone, and then, a little later, the dull thud of a steady canter. The fellow rode recklessly enough through such gloom, rode as if he were no stranger to the path, yet surely he would be compelled to rein up as he came to cross the water, and with this in mind, I half slid, half crept down to the very edge of the stream, crouching beneath the dense shade of an out-cropping rock, grasping my club firmly, but with heart pounding from excitement. I must act quickly, mercilessly, or there would certainly be firing, the spread of alarm. Not only my own life, but perhaps the fate of an army, depended upon that struggle in the dark.

CHAPTER IV

AN UNEXPECTED PREDICAMENT

CHUG! chug! chug! The fellow was evidently astride of a good horse. Once he broke sharply into a canter, under the spur, but mostly the sounds were those of steady, swift trotting, the rider, no doubt, permitting the animal to pick its own way, with scarcely a restraint upon the rein. They came down the opposite bank, stumbling slightly at the abruptness of the descent, slowing to a walk at the edge of the stream, and then I obtained, for the first time, a dim, smudgy outline of both horse and man. There was a splash of hoofs, a slight pause, as the animal gulped down a few hasty swallows of water, a muttered oath from the impatient rider, accented by a dip of spurs, a scramble for footing on the bank.

The horse saw me as I leaped forward, and sprang sideways, the suddenness of movement causing his surprised rider to lean far out in instinctive effort to retain his seat in the saddle. What followed was strain, confusion, struggle. I had him by the jacket collar, dragging him to earth, and we went down together, clinching desperately. His revolvers were in the saddle holsters, and we fought it out with bare hands. It was so swiftly done as to be scarcely describable; I recall blows struck, the fierce wrestling, a smothered oath, a grappling at the

throat, the rolling over and over, our limbs twisted together, and then my throttling him until he lay prone and helpless. There was a derringer in his inner jacket pocket. I felt it as I rested on top, and, wrenching it forth, I pressed the round muzzle against his forehead, my voice full of threat at the slightest movement. The fellow now lay breathless, trembling like an aspen from exertion, more frightened than hurt, yet with all the fight whipped out of him.

Using little enough ceremony, I stripped him of jacket and trousers, flinging down in return beside his prostrate body my own fragments of uniform. As I hastily donned the garments thus feloniously appropriated, my fingers chanced to touch the braided insignia of rank on the jacket collar, and I stopped, staring down in surprise at the dark outline still cowering before the levelled derringer.

"Who are you, an orderly?"

"No, a lieutenant of cavalry."

A flash of light came to me; I had waylaid the speeding bridegroom.

"Oh, indeed," I said, the surprise of discovery rendering me careless. "Then I suppose you must be Calvert Dunn?"

He made no reply which I could understand.

"Come, you might as well answer me."

"I am."

"Of Johnston's staff, I believe, but what regiment?"

"The Tenth Georgia. But who are you? What do you mean by this attack? How do you happen to know my name?"

I took ample time to consider my answer, buttoning the tight-fitting jacket to the throat; then said coldly,—

"I hardly suppose it will do any harm for you to know, as I propose tying you up safely, and leaving you here out of sight and sound. You will be discovered all right by morning; by that time I shall be well beyond your reach. The truth may give you something to think over, but first answer me a question or two: Have your pickets been withdrawn from the road leading east?"

He remained silent, until I pressed the lips of the derringer against his cheek.

"Yes, damn you; I would n't tell, but I believe you know it already. What I want to know is who you are!"

"A question easily answered. I am a Yankee artilleryman, who was left for dead on the field yonder. I have been hiding on the Denslow plantation, waiting for night to afford me opportunity for escape beyond your lines. While secreted there I overheard enough of a conversation to learn your name as well as your purpose. But I was not in hiding here expecting to intercept you, for Colonel Denslow believed that, owing to the sudden movement of the army, you would be unable to escape from your staff duties long enough to keep your engagement. He expected, however, the arrival of an orderly at any moment ordering his immediate return to his regiment. I came here hoping to capture that orderly, and appropriate his horse and clothes, so as to facilitate my escape. I sincerely regret that you, instead, were the victim."

The man was uplifted upon one elbow, endeavoring vainly to distinguish my features in the darkness.

"To hell with your regrets," he swore roughly. "Do you mean to tell me that you know what our plans of operation are?"

"I know enough of them, at least, to make me particularly anxious to get away. Now stop that, Lieutenant; not another move; doubtless you know what this derringer contains; I will assuredly use it if necessary, and it feels to me like a hair-trigger. Put out your hands; no, hold them close together — so."

The utter uselessness of resistance was very plain, and, reckless as the fellow might have proven if opportunity served, he realized now clearly enough that death would probably be the penalty of refusal. I did a good job of lashing, thoroughly aware that if he once escaped, and succeeded in raising an alarm before morning, I was the one who would suffer. I greatly disliked gagging him, yet at any moment the belated orderly might ride past, and a single cry from the Lieutenant would mean release and pursuit.

The horse waited patiently, his nostrils still thrust down in the cool running water, his rein trailing. I turned him about, as I must ride directly past the Denslow plantation in my effort to escape, owing to the massing of troops to the westward. If I could rely on the word of the Lieutenant, all pickets had already been recalled from the opposite direction, and I would discover clear passage, although this might prove the long way round. I led the horse slowly forward, moving as noiselessly as possible along the turf by the side of the road, hoping thus to steal past beneath the concealing shadows of the trees. The

men would never perceive me at that distance from the veranda, unless some unusual noise should reveal our passage; the greater danger of discovery lay with "Massa George" or the negro Joe, one or perhaps both of whom would very likely be with the waiting horses, near where the garden fence came out even with the road.

I advanced thus as far as the shed, seeing and hearing nothing in any way to alarm me; the house was unlighted, and I could perceive no movement in the darkness ahead, not even the restless motion of horses. I knew where these should be tethered, however, and holding my own animal firmly by the bit, my other hand grasping his nostrils, I led him cautiously forward beneath the blackness of the overhanging boughs. We must have advanced thus for a hundred feet or more, scarcely making a rustling in the short grass under-foot, when a horse neighed shrilly to our right. My horse as instantly stopped and flung up his head, the sudden, unexpected movement loosening my grip. As I hastened to restrain him, my hand struck the overhanging branch of a tree, rattling the leaves sharply. Instantly a dim figure rose up apparently in the very middle of the road.

"Who am dar?" It was the voice of the negro, startled, trembling, yet loud with alarm. "Massa George; Massa George, sah!"

He had not even then perceived me in the shadow, yet I durst not move an inch, and I could hear George hastily leap the fence. I swung silently up into the saddle, my first impulse being to drive in the spurs and ride recklessly. But the negro had located me now, and, encouraged by

the near presence of his master, sprang directly to the horse's head. The fellow must have possessed the eyes of an owl to have even noted my shape and uniform under such conditions, for to me he was but the merest unrecognizable smudge, yet his shout of recognition came before I could attempt the first motion to escape.

"Fer de Lord's sake, if it ain't Massa Calvert! What fer yer try to fool dis nigger like dat, sah?"

His words awoke within me a sudden hope. Possibly amid that intense darkness I might pass muster, for long enough, at least, to gain some advantage; perhaps even to escape without being compelled to do him bodily injury. It must be either that, or else an instant struggle which could only add to my danger, no matter how it terminated. I was very nearly Dunn's size, for his uniform fitted me as though made to my measure, and I was sufficiently versed in local conditions for all immediate requirements of such a masquerade. My voice was the greatest peril, that and a possible light which might reveal my features. All this swept through my brain in a flash, so that I answered back even before young Denslow reached us.

"It 's all right, Joe; my horse went lame back yonder, and the night is so dark I did n't even know I was here yet. What is the matter with the house that you don't show any light?"

The negro laughed loudly, evidently relieved in his own mind, and released his grip on the rein.

"Fore de Lord, Massa Calvert, dat was suah a good joke on you. Nebber did I tink you not know when you

git to dis house. Why was it we not hab any light burning? 'Cause de Yankees done took all de oil, an' we ain't got no more to burn. Lor'! we ain't seen no manner o' light in dis yere house for most free weeks. We 's jist felt our way 'round. I 's bin in de dark so much I done got cat eyes, an' dat 's how dis nigger done knowed you jist now. It am Massa Calvert, Massa George, an', shuar as you're alive, he was goin' right by de house, if I had n't a-stopped him — nebber even knowed he was yere yet."

Young Denslow, the dim outline of his figure that of a mere stripling, but standing rather stiffly erect, held out his hand.

"Glad you succeeded in making it, Calvert. We were becoming afraid you might not get away owing to the sudden advance of the troops. Is it true we have started on a movement by the left flank?"

"Yes, that report is all true enough," I replied striving to hold my voice as low as possible, as I could recall no marked peculiarity in the tones of my late antagonist to imitate; "the aides are riding in every direction with orders for a forced march. I went in and saw General Johnston as soon as I first heard the rumor, and explained to him exactly the situation here. The old man was very sympathetic, and as he had already met Jean, he arranged to send me out in this direction with his orders, and gave me a furlough of twenty-four hours in which to attend to my own affairs. I am to be in Minersville at the expiration of that time, no matter what it may cost in horseflesh."

"What about the Tenth Georgia?"

"They take up the march at midnight, guarding Coyne's Battery."

"The hell! Then that means a hard ride for both Dad and me with little enough time to spare. But dismount, Calvert, and come up to the house. Here, let Joe take care of your horse, and find out what troubles him — got a stone in his hoof most likely."

The boy had his hand on my pommel, the negro still standing directly in front of the horse's head. What action to escape could I take? It seemed at that moment far easier to permit Fate to decide the play than to take it into my own hands. It was not in my heart to shoot down these unsuspecting men in cold blood, and yet there was no other way of getting clear. I slipped a revolver from the left saddle holster into the side pocket of my cavalry jacket, and swung reluctantly to the ground, determining to chance another act in this strange melodrama. As he clasped my arm the lad felt the Colt bulging out the close-fitting jacket.

"Travelling loaded, I see."

"Certainly; I am likely to be beyond the lines before morning."

"That 's right, old boy," his voice suggestive of a laugh. "Not exactly the kind of a bridal tour that most people would seek, but needs must when the devil drives."

The entire unpleasantness of the situation dawned upon me with a shock at his words. In the excitement of swiftly succeeding events I had entirely forgotten that particular errand which had brought Lieutenant Dunn to this

neighborhood. Here was a most awkward predicament, indeed,— the prearranged, hurried wedding between him and that young, sweet-faced girl, with the gray-blue eyes. The pleasant memory of her came before me instantly, the musical sound of her soft voice, with its delicate Southern accent, the pathetic pleading of her girlish expression, the carelessly ruffled hair, the indignant tone with which she had spoken of her coming lover. Merciful God! I was certainly up against a hard proposition. What could I do? How, even now, could I manage to escape from the coils steadily closing about me? My head was in a whirl; I was unable to think clearly.

Young Denslow, his hand still grasping my sleeve, his brain full of interest in the affair, was rattling off, in boyish fashion, a string of remarks, the meaning of which scarcely penetrated to the recesses of my bewildered mind. There appeared to me no path leading out from this labyrinth now, but through the killing of some one; yet every manly instinct within me revolted against cold-blooded murder. I was a soldier, but never an assassin. And surely there was yet an opportunity for escape — the very lateness of the hour, the urgent requirement for haste on the part of all concerned, the possibility that the necessary papers had not been procured, the girl's strong opposition to the ceremony. Surely, aided by all these, I might yet discover some means for averting the full consequences of this misfortune; ay, might even serve her a good turn by preventing her being forced into a marriage with Dunn. Anyway, I should be in no worse position on the porch than

here, with the boy's hand on my arm. Indeed, almost before I had succeeded in reasoning the matter out thus far, we were at the steps, and I could perceive the outlines of two black figures rising up to greet me. It was the deep voice of the elder Denslow which spoke, his outstretched hand warmly grasping mine.

"The last minute, Calvert, my boy, the last minute. So we are to march at midnight, you say? Well, we can make it with hard riding, and I can go now with a relieved heart, knowing Jean will be well looked after while we are away. I had about decided to send George with her to-night to Fairview if worse came to worst, although I hardly thought you would fail us. Come up, my boy; there are chairs here to be discovered by feeling after them in the dark. Jean is somewhere within hearing, already dressed for the ride, but the damned thieving Yanks have not left us a light about the house, nor very much of anything else. However, we can get along in the dark; I reckon the parson knows his lines without a book — ah, by the way, Chaplain Mordaunt, you must be acquainted with Lieutenant Dunn, as you are both stationed at headquarters?"

"I have seen him occasionally, although, as you may recall, he is but newly assigned."

"True; only your second week of staff duty, is n't it, Calvert? Well, we scarcely have time to discuss these matters now. There are more important affairs to be considered. You were satisfied with the legality of the papers, Chaplain?"

"Certainly; the license appears to be drawn in regular

form. However, even if it were not, my authority in such time of war is ample."

"Good; then we shall have to dispense with all unnecessary ceremony, and get away as soon as possible. Jean, daughter."

There was no immediate response. A swift hope thrilled through me that she might have already fled, or have hidden herself within the darkened house. If so, what could I do? How could I assist in prolonging the delay? The hospitable Colonel had half forced me back into a vacated chair, and now remained facing me, standing shoulder to shoulder with his son on the upper step. The Chaplain remained seated close upon my left; all about us was latticework, thickly covered with trailing vines. The only way of escape would be by flinging both father and son headlong to the walk below, or perhaps a sudden dash back into the unknown interior. Only sheer desperation would warrant either effort, yet I half turned, but the shadows were so black I could not discern the whereabouts of the door. The Colonel spoke again, his voice growing sterner from authority.

"Jean, we are waiting here for you; Calvert Dunn has come."

I neither saw nor heard her as she came forward; when she answered, her slight figure suddenly appeared standing between her father and the Chaplain, a mere indistinct outline, yet so womanly as to send a sudden thrill to my heart.

"Very well, father; I am here to keep my word with Lieutenant Dunn."

CHAPTER V

CAUGHT IN THE TRAP

IT had come; the urgent necessity for instant action, for immediate decision, was upon me, and — I failed. I saw the Chaplain rise deliberately to his feet, and I struggled up also, fiercely gripping the back of my chair, half tempted to use it as a weapon with which to sweep the steps before me clear. Yet I hesitated, swayed by doubt, influenced by many emotions. What was right? What was best? What ought I to do?

I was unable to decide in that instant given me for decision. I realized this much — I must get away, not only in personal safety, but likewise without creating alarm, or leaving behind me any knowledge of the special message I hoped to carry with me across the river. To that end I could gladly sacrifice myself, all of my future if need should be, but had I any right to sacrifice her also? Would even the license of war exonerate me? The opportunity for an easy escape lay clear before me; merely a few brief words spoken in the darkness, the silent acting of a simple part, the riding away together, the others departing unsuspectingly to their several commands, the leaving of the uninjured girl within easy reach of Fairview, which could not be far distant, then the spur, the river, and Rosecrans.

This programme appeared so easy, so tempting. It seemed as though everything had been shaped to this end, as if it were the will of Providence. Some one drew back the chairs, and a slender figure stood silently by my left side. I could not distinguish a feature of her averted face, but a vagrant breath of air blew a strand of soft hair against my cheek. Could I sacrifice her, even for such a cause? Suddenly, as if it were the whisper of the devil in my ear, came the controlling thought — she despises the man Dunn; she is being driven into this marriage against her will; possibly this very fraud on my part will best serve her, will eventually result in her final happiness. We would be together merely for an hour, or two hours; then she would be left safe in the care of friends, comprehending the deceit, angry with me, no doubt, yet nothing the worse for the adventure. It might even be that the marriage contracted under such peculiar circumstances would not be held as legal, while if it was, a divorce could be most easily obtained, on the ground of fraud, and it would remain in her memory afterwards merely as an unpleasant episode. What it might prove to me, I neither considered nor cared.

"You will join right hands."

How soft and small her hand was, how cold to the touch, and how it trembled beneath the clasp of my fingers! I can scarcely recall a word spoken; they came to me in the vaguest mumble of sound, conveying not the slightest meaning. I could see the broad shoulders of the Chaplain as he stood directly in front of us, his back to the steps; behind him appeared the dim outlines of the Colonel

and Master George; I did not really perceive the girl at all, merely felt her cold hand lying unresponsive within mine. Once the drawling voice appeared to ask me something, repeating the question somewhat sharply before I could force my dry lips into the few necessary words of response. Then I heard her distinctly say, "I do," yet with an effort, as though the utterance nearly choked her. The very sound of these two words, as she thus spoke them filled with utter hopelessness, shocked me even then, and I loosened my clasp, permitting her hand to drop, as I stared toward her. The hot blood rushed to my head, every nerve tingling. Damned if I would be guilty of this cowardly thing! I would fight them all first!

"And now I pronounce you husband and wife; whom God hath joined together let no man put asunder."

It was already too late! Too late! The evil was done, the act consummated. In darkness, in masquerade, pretending to be another, I stood there and married Jean Denslow. I was actually guilty of this low, despicable fraud on a woman; I had connived at this ungentlemanly act; I had permitted myself to sink to this unspeakable meanness. I do not comprehend now how I ever held my peace; how I met the outstretched hands of congratulation, what inane words I mumbled in reply. I was conscious merely of regret, humiliation, intense shame. She never came near me, never once spoke, but I heard her sob chokingly as she hid her face on her father's shoulder. Slowly the life came creeping back to me, and with it the realization of our position, a dim comprehension that the cowardly game must now be played out to the end. How-

ever inexcusable the fraud, it must now be turned to good account; results must in some measure justify the deceit. I gripped my hands on the chair-back, compelling myself to attend to what was going on about me. George had disappeared but I could hear the sound of horses being led forward over the grass below.

"Well, good-bye, little girl." It was the Colonel's voice. "The ride is n't a long one, and you can scarcely understand how greatly it will relieve me to know that you are safe in the care of friends."

"I say, Calvert, there does n't seem to be anything the matter with your horse," suddenly sang out the boy from below. "He'll carry you all right. What 's keeping you and Jean? Don't you know we've got to get out of here?"

"Yes, come, Calvert," and the unsuspecting old Colonel grasped my arm. "Jean is waiting, and we must all of us be off."

It was accomplished mechanically, yet I remember assisting the girl into the saddle, slipping her little foot into the stirrup, my heart beating fast as I touched the arched instep, and felt her slight weight rest for an instant on my shoulder. All at once I apprehended the sweet charm of her young womanhood, coupled with an odd feeling of personal interest. My God! it was a strange situation! I had never even spoken to her; she had never once spoken to me — yet she was my wife. Some way the thought thrilled me as if I had received an electric shock. Jean Denslow was already actually mine; I could claim her by law; she bore my name — why, she did n't

even know what my name was! The sense of humiliation seemed to leave me at the thought, and I even smiled at the humor of it as I swung up into my own saddle. Humor? oh, yes! But it would certainly prove no matter for laughter when she once discovered the truth.

I recall the warm hand-clasps, the cheery words of goodbye, the hearty congratulations, to which we both remained strangely dumb, the several figures standing clustered at our horses' heads; then we rode forth alone, and, knowing nothing as to the direction in which Fairview lay, I permitted the lady's horse to take the lead slightly. To my immense relief she drew rein sharply to the right, and we headed eastward. Unacquainted with the nature of the road we travelled, I hesitated to speed the horses, anxious though I was to be well advanced before daylight, but she as instantly decided the matter by touching her mount with a light riding-whip, the gray mare under her breaking into a smart canter. Immediately I ranged up at her side, my heavier roan easily keeping the pace, as I permitted him to pick his own way. It was like riding blindfolded, so black was all ahead, with what appeared to be thick forest on either side; yet the road was evidently a well-travelled one, and our horses very seldom made a misstep. Once her high-spirited mare shied violently, so that I reached out, and hastily grasped her rein, but, so far as I could perceive, the slender figure scarcely swayed in the saddle, and her lips uttered no sound. At a steady stride we rode onward through the gloom in silence, an embarrassing constraint upon us both. I could realize plainly enough those emotions which were

swaying her, but she little comprehended the thoughts of the man at her side. Again and again I glanced toward her, my lips opening for speech, yet unable to utter the first syllable. I had in my heart the fear of a coward; I dreaded to confess the truth, and face her just indignation. Yet I was inevitably driven to it; there was nothing else for me to do, unless I should suddenly rein back my horse, ride swiftly away in the darkness, leaving her alone and undefended. That would be the act of a cur; it would insure me her hatred forever, and, deep down in my heart, I was already beginning to desire the future goodwill of this girl. I wanted her to respect my motives, to understand what it was which had driven me into such an act of deceit. Not even justified in my own mind, I yet dreamed I might possibly justify myself in some small degree before her. Once, as if the constrained silence had become unbearable, she ventured a commonplace remark upon the black stillness of the night, to which I must have replied stiffly enough, for both immediately relapsed into silence; the only sound was made by our horses' hoofs, now pounding along a road grown hard and rocky as we steadily rose into higher altitudes. In the narrow bed of a stream we drew rein to permit the animals to drink thirstily. Feeling that I must now know something more definite as to this country we traversed, I began doubtfully to probe after the information.

"I rather expected to encounter pickets along the road," I began, staring about into the night. "Have they been withdrawn?"

I imagined she glanced toward me as if in surprise at my words, or rendered suspicious by the sound of my voice.

"All pickets in this direction were recalled last night, when General Huston returned to his brigade," she replied indifferently.

"Then we are already between the lines?"

"Neither army has ever been east, on this slope of the mountains, so far as I know. Two weeks ago Joe drove me over to Coulter's Landing after some supplies for the house, and the country at that time appeared to have been untouched even by foraging parties. I have heard of no movements in this direction since then."

"Have n't I heard there was a ford at Coulter's?"

"Just below the landing, yes; but it is narrow, and never safe when the water is at all high. Why, we crossed it together only last Summer on our way to Franklyn."

"To be sure; so we did. I have passed through so much since then that I have grown forgetful."

The horses lifted their heads, their wet nostrils dripping, and we rode up the opposite bank, noticing a star or two peeping shyly out from among the ragged clouds. The road uplifted somewhat sharply, but there were comparatively level reaches along which we galloped, riding closely side by side, so that I could feel the touch of her skirt against my leg. The faint gleam of the stars afforded me a slight glimpse of my companion sitting her horse easily, her hair blowing back beneath the rim of a coquettish hat, the soft oval of her face barely taking

shape in the gloom. She was gazing directly ahead, apparently utterly unconscious of my near presence, every thought concentrated elsewhere. When was the end to come? Why was it I could not muster sufficient courage to speak, could not even determine what it was I desired to say? Surely I was not afraid of this helpless, slender girl. If I had done wrong it was for the cause of my country, and I had nothing now to fear except her anger. Why should I greatly care for that? Why should I shrink from revealment as a slave from the lash? Suddenly she brought the end upon herself, reining up her mare so sharply that, when I also came to a halt, we were facing each other, my horse rearing from the heavy pressure on his bit.

"What is it? Did you see something?"

"Nothing but that dead pine yonder," pointing toward the left. "We have ridden beyond the cut-off."

"Beyond —"

"Yes, a quarter of a mile beyond. What can be the matter with you to-night? Have you forgotten the way to your own home?"

There was a vague touch of suspicion in the voice, and she was leaning forward evidently striving in vain to distinguish my features in the darkness. An instant I hesitated, no satisfactory excuse coming to my lips. She touched her mare lightly with the whip, forcing her forward.

"Why does it take you so long to answer? You are not usually so dumb."

"I was surprised at having ridden beyond the turn;

I — I must have been dreaming," I ventured, still striving to retard the inevitable exposure. But by now she had become convinced that something was wrong; had grown alarmed, indignant. I heard the sharp indrawing of her breath, and marked the uplifting of her hand as if to shade her eyes.

"You — you are not Calvert Dunn," she ejaculated swiftly. "Your voice is unlike his."

I stared at her, my lips dry, my tongue useless, even feeling myself tremble in the saddle.

"Tell me the truth! Who — who are you?" The girl's voice faltered and broke, her hands pulling so hard on the reins as to cause her restless mare to back away.

I was compelled to speak now, rapidly, my voice full of a sympathy and earnestness I made no effort to conceal. She appealed to me; outside her unfortunate situation, merely as a woman she appealed. Even the bravery with which she faced me, sitting there straight and slender in the saddle, was pathetic.

"Don't draw back," I said quickly. "Don't be afraid. Nothing will harm you. I pledge you the word and honor of a soldier that no unfriendly hand shall touch you, no word be spoken to which you need object. Only listen and I will explain all. It is true I am not Lieutenant Dunn, but you are personally as safe with me as you would be riding this road with him. I mean to take you to his people at Fairview, and leave you there entirely unharmed by this night's adventure."

"But — but who are you?"

"A soldier left wounded on the field, who, seeking to

escape from capture, was compelled to assume this uniform."

"A — a Yankee?" the question barely audible, yet the low voice expressive of intense horror.

"Yes, as you use the term," I admitted, yet even then scarcely comprehending what the word signified to her. "I am from the West, but belong to the Federal army."

Her figure seemed to sink down into the saddle, her head drooping forward.

"Are you so bitterly prejudiced as to believe all Northerners are unworthy? Can you not forget the color of the uniform for a single hour, and trust me to act justly?"

She straightened up instantly, gripping the saddle pommel, and staring toward me through the night.

"But — but," she sobbed, the full bewildering horror of it echoing in her voice. "We have been married! O Father of mercy — married to a Yankee!"

I put my hand out upon the bit of her mare, leaning toward her in my eagerness to explain, determined to finish before she could again interrupt. Better a confession of the whole truth now, except that I durst not trust her with the news I hoped to bear across the river.

"I beg you listen to me; listen to all I have to say. If you fully comprehend the situation you may not condemn me so completely. I know I have done wrong — have been guilty of a cowardly act — yet it is not beyond remedy, and I have been driven to it for the preservation of life. Believe me when I say that I respect you; that I will treat you with all honor; only hear what I have

to say in my own defence. To be a Federal soldier is not a crime, nor evidence of a debased manhood. That we should differ in time of war does not mean that all which is gentlemanly should be enrolled upon the one side. There are true, honest, upright men wearing both uniforms — the difference between us is political. I am in the Northern army because I am a Northerner, because I have been educated in the principles of that section of the country, and have been called upon to fight to sustain them. Surely you cannot despise me for that alone. That would not be just, nor womanly. I am going to appeal to you simply as a man, not as a partisan. Forget that I was born north, and you south of Mason and Dixon's line, and judge my actions from a fairer standard. Can you do this?"

She did not move nor answer, yet her very silence gave me renewed courage.

"I know you can and will. You have the face and eyes of a woman to be trusted, to be confided in —"

"How do you know that?"

"Because I saw you yesterday, while you were talking with the negro Joe, in the tool-shed."

"You — you were there? — you overheard?"

"Yes," I confessed unwillingly, for her tone was a rebuke. "But I was not an eavesdropper from choice. I was there in concealment, and had fallen asleep. Your voices awoke me."

I knew she was staring toward me, still dazed by the discovery of who I was, unable to decide what to do or

say, although her features were utterly indistinguishable. At last she seemed to gain sufficient control of her breath to falter,

"You may go on; I — I will listen."

"It is only a short story. I was a member of Reynolds's battery, having enlisted from Illinois. I have been in the service nearly two years. During that last battle yonder, your soldiers charged and captured our guns. In the struggle I was struck in the side by a splinter, and rendered unconscious by a blow on the head. I chanced to fall beneath the cannon, which had been so demolished as to be rendered useless, and lay there like one dead until late at night. When consciousness returned I realized the horrors of my situation, as well as the certainty of capture and imprisonment if I remained there until daylight. Finding myself able to move, I crawled to a near-by stream, attended as best I could to my wounds, and, remembering a vague glimpse of your house down the valley, caught as our battery went forward into action, I naturally turned in that direction, seeking for some place of concealment until another night-fall."

She did not change her posture, yet as I paused I could plainly hear her rapid breathing.

"It was a hard journey, yet I finally crept into your tool-shed just before daybreak, and fell asleep. Your conversation with the negro aroused me, and after you had both gone, and the night came to hide my movements, I succeeded in procuring some food. Before starting to find my way into the Federal lines, I chanced to overhear some conversation on the front veranda, and learned that

an orderly was expected to arrive at any moment from the west. Realizing the advantage of possessing his horse and uniform, I resolved to waylay the rider. To accomplish this I made my way back as far as the creek crossing, and lay in wait there. It was not long before a mounted man came down the opposite bank, and stopped to water his horse in the stream. Ten minutes later he was lying there helpless, securely gagged and bound, and I was leading his horse forward, hoping to steal past your plantation unobserved in the darkness."

"But — but it was not the orderly you attacked," she exclaimed. "It was Calvert Dunn."

"Yes, it was Lieutenant Dunn, but I assure you he was left unhurt. What followed I think you already know: how I was discovered by Joe and your brother; how in the gloom they very naturally mistook me for Dunn; how they insisted upon my coming up to the house. I was compelled to yield to their insistence, or else fight them; I never thought at that moment of Dunn's special mission; it merely seemed as if the mistake in identity gave me an opportunity for escape. You realize how all the rest was forced upon me; there appeared no possible way to avoid what happened. When I first arose to my feet at the request of the Chaplain, it was with the intention of knocking your father and brother down, and making a mad rush for the horses. But I hesitated a moment too long. Even as I stood there, bracing myself for the struggle, the Chaplain began, and you took my hand. Then do you comprehend what induced me to remain silent?"

I paused in vain; there was no sound, no movement.

"It was because I knew how you dreaded that marriage with Calvert Dunn."

"And," she burst forth, "did you imagine I would prefer one with you?"

"Certainly not, but it saved you from him and from what might have proven a life-time of misery. You need never see me again, and any court would immediately grant you a divorce on the ground of fraud. I even doubt if such a marriage would be held legal."

"But — but, you do not understand," her words almost sobs. "I have ridden away with you. I am here alone with you now."

"My purpose is to leave you at Fairview. It will require no more than two hours from the time we left your people before we arrive there. No one need ever know the truth, excepting those anxious to protect your good name. You may trust me implicitly."

"Trust you — you! What, after all this? After your lies, your eavesdropping, your spying, your tricking of me into this awful situation? God forgive me! Married to a Yankee! Release my rein!"

I hesitated, the fierce flaming up of her anger so suddenly paralyzing my senses. There was a swift uplifting of her arm to a level with my head.

"I mean it! You thought me helpless, and — and in your power, but I am not. You drop that rein, or I'll fire. Oh, I can do it, you — you miserable Yankee spy! I hate and despise you!"

She drew back her horse, wheeling the animal about,

yet turning in the saddle herself so as to keep me in view.

"I do not know why I do not kill you," she exclaimed, her voice growing bitter with anger. "It is what I should do; you deserve it by your own confession, and the one shot would release me. Married to a Yankee!" every syllable hissing from her lips. "The very thought crazes me and puts murder in my heart. I am going to Fairview alone — alone! Do you hear that? If you dare attempt to follow me I will shoot you in your tracks as I would a dog, you low-down, Yankee cur."

With a single swift leap forward, both horse and rider disappeared in the gloom.

CHAPTER VI

THE ACCIDENT

SURPRISED I certainly was by this unexpected outburst. Scarcely realizing previously the indomitable spirit of the girl, before the sound of her mare's flying hoofs had ceased to echo along the hard road, I had given my roan the rein, and was spurring speedily after. I intended to keep within sound at least, nor would I desert her until she was safe in the care of friends. We were between the lines of two hostile armies, in a debatable country, where every possible form of danger might lurk, where bands of irresponsible guerillas, deserters, and fleeing conscripts, roamed unchecked by any authority, where no woman alone in the night could be considered safe for an instant. No fear of her threatening pistol kept me even thus far to the rear, but I sympathized with her, comprehended her outraged feelings, realizing how, in that moment of discovery, she must hate my very presence. And she was right; I had acted the part of a cur; I deserved to be cut by the lash of her tongue, even to be shot dead, if I dared so much as to touch her. Yet it hurt me, hurt me more than I had before supposed any denunciation by a woman possibly could, and I spurred forward grimly, with heart hotly pulsing. I was everything she said, yet it had not come home to me in full force, in all its

hideousness, until she said it. Her bitter words stung like a whip, stung all the more sharply because I knew they were deserved.

I rode silently, keeping a tight rein, so as not to gain upon her too rapidly, guided straight by the sound of her swift galloping. The night settled down, darker if possible than before, even the few stars which had been visible, disappearing behind the canopy of clouds. I could see nothing ahead except an occasional spark of fire struck off from the flinty rock by her mare's flying feet. All else was the void of night, out of which arose alone the sound of our reckless riding. It seemed to me we must have fully covered that quarter of a mile back to where she had indicated the branch road as leading down toward Fairview, yet there was no turning, or pause in the swift pace. Apparently the little mare was being urged desperately forward through the black void, headed directly west along the same ridge road we had previously travelled together. There was an opening between the walls of rocks to my left, visible even in that darkness, and I drew up the roan sharply, swinging myself instantly to the ground, and feeling about hastily with my feet for the ruts of a travelled roadway. Ay! this must surely be the place; here beyond all doubt ran the way leading south into the valley. There could be no other road branching off at this point. Yet the girl was riding directly westward, riding at full speed, her horse's hoofs sounding fainter each moment.

I stood there an instant, puzzled, uncertain. Then the truth came to me in a flash. She suspected I had over-

heard more than I had confessed; that I knew of the projected movement of the Gray army, and that it was now my purpose to warn the Blue. That was why she had called me "spy"; that was why she was now riding straight on at top speed, desperately, through the night, bearing a message of warning to Johnston. With a single bound I was back in the saddle, bent forward over the roan's neck, and driving in the spur. I must overtake her, and I could do it. I was astride of far the better horse, stronger, longer limbed, and I must ride as recklessly as she. I was conscious of little except the necessity of the moment, pushing into the black void as though astride a thunderbolt, the night air whistling past my face, my legs gripping the straining body of the roan, my spur constantly urging him to greater effort. And he responded nobly. Slowly, steadily, remorselessly I began drawing in on the chase; I could see nothing, but my ears gave evidence. That she also realized what was occurring behind became sufficiently clear a moment later; out of that shrouding blackness in my front winked two red spits of fire, and I heard a bullet whistle shrilly as it zipped past my head. But I thundered on regardless, merely extending my body along the roan's neck; there was small danger from such shots, and I comprehended anew the desperation of the girl, the determination with which she sought to thwart me. A stern chase is proverbially a long one, and I must have been still fully a hundred feet in her rear, speeding like a whirlwind, my horse running with belly low, and neck extended, the foam from his nostrils blowing back in my face, when

there was a stumble, a cry, the dull shock of a fall. I reined up with a suddenness which nearly unseated me, and swung down from the saddle, peering and listening. Some accident had occurred — but what? There was no sound, not even a moan or struggle yonder in the dark. Slowly I pushed forward on foot, the tired, panting animal trailing along after me.

All excitement and exhilaration of the chase were gone. There was nothing in my heart now but sympathy for this girl; her supreme effort to be of service to her cause had aroused my deepest respect. What had happened to her? In a measure I already knew — her laboring mare had stumbled in the darkness, and gone down, flinging her headlong. That she had been hurt, seriously hurt, the silence seemed to indicate — but how seriously? I went forward quaking, my heart beating like that of a timid girl in the dark. I came first upon the gray mare, a motionless smudge in the road, lying head under, in such a posture I knew instantly the animal's neck had been broken. Fully ten feet beyond the girl lay, just at the edge of the track, her face upturned to the clouded skies. I dropped upon my knees, drew off her gauntlet glove, and felt her wrist. There was a noticeable pulse; an instant later I was enabled to distinguish the faint pulsations of the heart. Unconscious though she was, the terrible fall had not killed her. There was water in the canteen dangling at my saddle bow, and I ran back to where the roan stood, and began hastily to bathe the white face, the contour of which I could barely perceive. Very slowly the returning breath came in greater volume

through the parted lips, and I lifted her slightly upon one arm, with head resting against my shoulder. I felt a slight trembling of the slender form, and realized, although I could see nothing, that her eyes were open. Suddenly she wrenched herself away from me, sitting erect, holding herself in that posture of protest by pressing her hands against the ground.

"Am — am I hurt?" she questioned, her voice tremulous, her mind apparently still dazed from the shock.

"You have had an ugly fall, and were rendered unconscious, but I do not think you are severely injured."

"And my horse?"

"The mare broke her neck."

She was silent for a moment, her breath rapid from excitement; then her head drooped, and I caught the sound of half-suppressed sobs.

"Please do not cry," I urged, with all a man's fear of a breakdown. "I am very sure you are not badly hurt, and you are too brave a girl to give way like this."

In an awkward effort at comfort I placed my hand gently upon her shoulder. The slight familiarity aroused her instantly.

"How dare you touch me," she exclaimed, all signs of weakness vanishing. "I do not wish either your help or sympathy, you despicable Yankee spy."

"But listen first —"

"No, I will not listen; your words, your very presence is an insult. I would have killed you if I could; I will kill you now if you speak to me again, or make any attempt to follow me."

I was aware she yet held the revolver in her hand, and realized she was keyed to the point of using it, yet I was not silenced.

"Where do you intend going?"

"That is no affair of yours. On foot I am helpless to thwart you, Mr. Spy, so now you can let me alone."

"Then it is true that you were attempting to ride for the Confederate lines?"

She did not answer, but endeavored to struggle weakly to her feet. Scarcely was her slender figure erect when she uttered a sharp cry of anguish, and sank limply back again, both hands clasped about her ankle.

"What is it?"

"My — my ankle; oh, it pains me so!"

"You must permit me to examine it," I said firmly, stooping forward as I spoke, fully determined now to have my own way. "You had a hard fall; it may be sprained, or even broken. In either case the shoe must be removed immediately, before it begins to swell."

The pain and helplessness of her position had made a woman of her again. Doubtless she realized the utter futility of further resistance, for she silently permitted me to unlace the shoe, and run my hand softly over the injured ankle. I could feel her wince at the pain of my touch, her fingers clinched tightly.

"It is merely a sprain," I announced at last. "I am very certain no bone has been broken. However, the injury is certainly bad enough, and precludes any thought of walking."

She stared toward me through the darkness, conscious

of her inability to revolt, yet with the old spirit of rebellion still dominant.

"Then leave me here; it will not be long until morning."

"I shall do nothing of the kind. Do you consider me devoid of every attribute of manhood? You would not be safe here alone, even if uninjured. We are between the lines of two hostile armies, in a debatable land where guerillas and bushwhackers must be numerous enough. Not if I have to remain here with you until daylight, and thus face almost certain capture, will I desert you now. I want you to do what is right, and do it willingly. If you refuse I shall be obliged to use my greater strength to compel obedience."

"What do you mean? What is it you plan for me to do?"

"I intend taking you upon my own horse as far as Fairview, and I will leave you there safe with your friends."

"And — and then?"

"Then, of course, I propose riding at once for the lines of my own army."

She drew a quick breath, straightening her shoulders.

"And do you imagine I will ever permit that?" she questioned fiercely "I am a Southern girl, armed, and I know what you mean to do, Mister Spy."

I stood up before her quietly in the gloom.

"You can certainly shoot me if you wish," I acknowledged soberly. "Perhaps you might be justified in such an act. I am not going to disarm you, nor make any

effort to prevent your doing as you desire. But if you do not shoot me, I intend doing my very best to take you safely to Fairview."

I think we were there for a long moment, motionless, speechless, staring toward each other's dim shadow through the darkness. Neither face was sufficiently visible for recognition, yet I could imagine the expression upon hers, as she sat thus, desperately clasping the revolver in her nervous fingers, swayed by fierce emotion, yet helpless to stand alone upon her feet. I was not at all certain what she might do at such a moment of temptation, driven to it by a vivid sense of her own wrongs, as well as the urgent demand of her cause. She was a woman of strong will, of unquestioned courage, of deep conviction; scarcely more than a girl in years, it is true, yet with fighting blood in her veins, and an honest hatred for me in her heart. It was a somewhat ticklish situation, yet assuredly no time in which to hesitate.

"Come," I said, at last, holding out my hand. "Every moment of delay only serves to increase your suffering. I am going to lift you onto the horse."

She shrank back as though to avoid my touch, her movement picturing her intense aversion. It angered me, and, reckless of all consequences, I bent instantly down, and lifted her slight form in my arms. To my intense surprise she made no resistance, no struggle, no effort to break away. Her head rested against my arm, with face averted, but I could feel a shudder run through her body, as if a sudden reaction had brought with it weakness. I strode with my light burden to the side of

the patiently waiting roan, finding place for her sound foot within the dangling stirrup.

"You will be compelled to ride man-fashion," I announced quietly. "I doubt if you could sit the saddle in any other way; but the night will protect you from observation. Kindly assist me in every way you can."

Whether it was my calm insistence, or merely her own sense of inability to resist longer, I do not know, but, for a single instant, I felt the weight of her hand upon my shoulder, and then she had found seat in the saddle, her head bowed forward, her hands clasping the pommel, as if the pain and exertion had left her faint. Somewhere in the passage, the uplifting, the revolver had slipped from her fingers, and fallen unnoticed into the blackness of the road. Without uttering a word I shortened the stirrup leather to meet her requirements, fastening the one opposite back, so it could not dangle against her injured ankle. Then I wet a silk neckerchief discovered in the pocket of the jacket I wore, sousing the cloth with water from the canteen, and bound it securely about the aching, swollen foot. If she realized what was being done, she gave no sign, and only as I grasped the horse's rein, and started forward on foot, did the girl raise her head in any sign of life. She swayed unsteadily to the first movements of the horse, and I glanced back apprehensively.

"Had I better bind you into the saddle?"

"No," the voice barely audible. "I shall not fall."

There was a long pause during which I could distinguish

the sound of her breath coming almost in sobs; then she asked in sudden wonderment,

"Are — are you going to walk — all the way?"

"Certainly."

Again I could plainly distinguish the sob of her rapid breathing.

"I — I thank you."

That was all, yet I cannot fitly express the comfort, the encouragement, these few falteringly spoken words brought to me. They were so unexpected, so significant of the final awakening of her more womanly nature, as to yield me instantly a fresh vision of the girl. She had recognized kindness, even in an enemy, and had proven fair-minded enough to respond generously. Whatever might occur between us hereafter, she would never be able to remember me as before. I had been considerate to her, and she had openly acknowledged the consideration. Yet I retained sufficient good sense to remain quiet; to push on silently through the black night, the roan plodding steadily at my heels. I did not even flatter myself that this slight outburst of gratitude would long endure. The old, disquieting thoughts would certainly soon recur to her mind — the memory of my treachery, my intentions, and, worse than all, my unfortunate relationship with her. Yet I had enjoyed that one glimpse into the deeps of her better nature, and remained content. She was certainly not one to brood over wrongs, to fan hatred, to refuse forgiveness; I even wondered vaguely if she were not secretly glad to be saved from Calvert Dunn, even at so great a cost.

The return journey proved exceedingly slow, for the intense pain she suffered left her weak, and I durst not move faster than a walk, ever keeping watchful eyes upon the dim outline of her form swaying in the saddle; yet we had not passed the branch road by as great a distance as I had supposed in our wild riding, and a comparatively few moments of steady plodding brought us to the cleft in the rocks.

"This is the road, is it not?"

She uplifted her head wearily.

"Yes; it is not far now to Fairview."

The path led downward, but not steeply, winding somewhat crazily among rocks and trees, until we finally emerged upon the smooth grass land of the lower valley. The silence here was profound, the brooding night seeming even more dense and lonely than upon the open ridge above. I felt my uncertain way forward, until the narrow road suddenly ended before a high gate. This I succeeded in opening without much difficulty, and we followed a gravelled driveway, which led circling to the front of what appeared in the gloom to be a house of considerable size. It was wrapped in darkness, no gleam of light anywhere giving evidence of occupancy. As I hesitated an instant at the foot of the steps leading upward to the front door, I felt her extended hand touch my shoulder.

"What are you going to say? — how explain my being here alone with you?"

I glanced back toward her, wishing I could read the meaning of her eyes, the expression of her face.

"I was merely intending to name myself as a Confederate officer, a friend of Lieutenant Dunn, intrusted by him to bring you here for safety, owing to his having been suddenly ordered out on special duty."

"And — and my accident?"

"Your horse stumbled in the darkness, and fell, in consequence of which I was compelled to convey you on my own."

She drew a deep breath of relief.

"Yes, that will do — that will be best now; they need never know the whole truth."

I waited for an instant, hoping she would be led to add something more, but her lips remained silent. The expression of her face could not be seen, yet I knew she was leaning slightly forward, as though seeking vainly to decipher my features in the gloom.

"I feel that you have sufficient reason to dislike me," I began, anxious to uncover, if possible, her true feeling.

"I know I have, and yet I do not," she exclaimed impulsively, and as though surprised at her own frankness. "I cannot explain why; I ought to hate you for what you have done. Yet in all this trouble you have proven yourself kind, thoughtful, considerate, and I can only feel mortified, hurt, and regretful at my present helplessness."

"It is very good of you to confess even that."

"Oh, no, there is no goodness in it. I am simply accustomed to speaking the truth under all circumstances. It is an unpleasant habit acquired in childhood. You are nothing to me, and never can be; I would do everything in my power to thwart your present purpose; I believe

I could shoot you down if I were still armed, and I know I would denounce you here and now, if there was any one at hand able to make you prisoner. We remain enemies, but — but, in some unaccountable way, I cannot personally hate you."

"You mean it is the Yankee, and not the man you war against?"

"I am certainly enlisted against your cause; nor have I any real reason to respect you otherwise."

"You consider me guilty then of deliberate treachery toward you?"

Her clear, accusing eyes were apparently gazing toward my shrouded face.

"Was it anything else?"

The blunt question came so swiftly that I stood hesitating. She was so frankly outspoken, so uncompromisingly direct, as to confuse me, yet in truth scarcely permitting any time for answer.

"What was it except treachery? You came to us falsely wearing that uniform which we respect; you came pretending to be another man; you obtained entrance to the sanctity of our home under an assumed name; you deliberately tricked me into a most unhappy and compromising position. Could any right-minded woman ever forgive all this? Is what you have done justified even by Yankee ethics?"

"No," I acknowledged gravely. "All the rest might be justified by the necessities of war, but not the personal injury which I have done you. Yet I am going to make that wrong as easy to remedy as I possibly can; I am

going away now, the very moment I can feel assured you are in the care of friends. It is not at all probable we shall ever meet again, and any court will give you instant release. But first I desire to say this: Amid all the trials of to-night you have appealed to me, have won my deepest admiration and respect. I cannot bear to feel, however much it might be deserved, that you utterly despise me."

"I acknowledge I do not; I believe what you have told me, that you merely yielded to circumstances in the hope of saving yourself, and thus gaining opportunity to perform what you consider an imperative duty."

"I thank you from the bottom of my heart for saying that. Before we finally part would you accept my hand?"

I knew she straightened stiffly back in the saddle, her hands pressed against the pommel.

"Oh, no, I could not do that. You have no right to ask such a thing; not while you continue to wear falsely that uniform; not while you intend riding directly away from here planning to do injury to my people."

I bowed, and turned away, hat in hand, toward the steps. Her voice halted me.

"Be — before you knock," she questioned doubtfully, "would you tell me your name?"

"Certainly, you will need to know that; I had forgotten. I am Elbert King."

"An — an officer?"

"Not commissioned; merely a sergeant of artillery."

Whatever her secret thoughts might have been, they were securely hidden in silence and darkness. Young as

she was in years she had already learned the lesson of control.

"I thank you; that was all."

I knocked twice before receiving any reply; then shuffling feet sounded within, and the voice of an aged man asked anxiously who was there.

"An officer of the Tenth Georgia Cavalry," I replied readily. "I have a lady with me who has been injured by a fall from her horse."

I heard him unbar the heavy door, opening it barely wide enough to peer cautiously forth. He had no light, yet I stood so close he doubtless was able to perceive my uniform. Before either of us could exchange words, the clear voice of the girl sounded from below.

"It is all right, Judge Dunn; I am Jean Denslow."

Our situation was explained in a few sentences, and, the Judge guiding me, I lifted her slender figure in my arms and bore her unresisting into the broad hallway. As he disappeared in a wheel chair propelled by a negro, seeking a light and assistance, I remained looking down to where I had deposited her on a comfortable haircloth couch.

"Is there anything more I can do?"

"No, nothing; I would much rather you would go before the others come."

"That will probably be best," reluctantly. "Yet I am beginning to wish I might come back again."

I heard the quick indrawing of her breath, but no spoken word.

"You will answer nothing?"

"Only that I wish to forget this night utterly, utterly. If you are indeed a gentleman you will understand, and go."

There was certainly nothing more to linger for, nothing more to be said. I heard the stiff rustle of a dress on the stair, and knew her friends were coming down. My own night's work yet remained unaccomplished, and was urgent. I passed swiftly out and down the steps.

CHAPTER VII

NEWS FOR ROSECRANS

I HAD ample time in which to reflect over all these occurrences as I urged my willing horse back along the valley road. The rest and the slow walk had revived the jaded muscles of us both, and the roan started off at a brisk trot the moment I swung into the saddle. I felt perfectly safe, so far as Jean Denslow was concerned. She certainly could no longer ride, and, to the best of my knowledge, there was no one at Fairview who could be trusted to depart westward with any message of warning to the Confederate commander. The girl herself would certainly never give up the effort quietly, and somehow I continued to feel that back of her womanly gentleness there was a firm purpose, and some well-defined plan. Yet what could she do? The possibility of her accomplishing anything in her present condition appeared so remote that I finally dismissed it entirely from my mind. As for myself, I intended following the east road at least as far as the ford at Coulter's Landing. Once safely beyond the river, I could soon find my way into the protection of the Federal lines.

I rode with sufficient caution, yet as rapidly as the condition of the roan would warrant. The night remained densely black, but I had learned to feel confident in my

horse's keeping the path, and pushed straight ahead through the gloom, trusting implicitly to his instinct. Nothing occurred of special import, either in the valley, or along the ridge, and the faint gray of coming daylight already streaked the lowering sky in our front as we trotted down the slope to the Landing. My own immediate duty was perfectly clear, and I pressed forward to its performance without great consideration, watchful for danger, determined to bear my message direct to headquarters, but otherwise giving my surroundings little heed. Somehow my entire thought, as we thus pounded on through the night, remained back yonder with that injured girl at Fairview. Her face was constantly before me, as I leaned forward, striving to peer into the shadows ahead,— what a happy, mocking, girlish face it would be under better conditions than those amid which I had known her. Those blue-gray eyes could be wells of mirth, and there was an irresistible charm of piquancy about her manner. I had never before met with such a personality; even under stress, and in the midst of grave peril, she was unable to conceal entirely her real sunshiny nature. Frank, truthful, outspoken, warm-hearted, she had made an impression upon me not easily forgotten. And this young woman was legally my wife! Somehow the thought sent the hot blood of youth rioting through my veins. Of course the relationship was no more than a mere name. It was not to be dwelt upon even in thought, and would be promptly dissolved. It was, as I well knew, a condition achieved by fraud and despicable deceit, yet, nevertheless, the fact remained that there was now this tie

existing between us. And she actually neither hated nor despised me for what I had done. She would have said otherwise plainly enough had she so felt; there could be no doubt as to that — she had confessed only as she had been compelled. Over and over again I reviewed the words which had passed between us, reading into them much that never was there, and dwelling in memory upon the accent of her voice, the guarded secret of her eyes. If I had never seen her in the full flush of daylight as it flooded the shed, revealing the charming girl face, framed by the loosely gathered hair, and illumined by those wonderful eyes of blue-gray, no such recollection would have lingered both to perplex and interest me. She would have simply passed out of my thought, as many another had already done, or else remained merely a vague and indistinct remembrance. But now she was a tantalizing reality, her girlish face and form continually haunting me, her inscrutable eyes ever calling me back, the soft, Southern accent of her voice music to my memory.

There was nothing whatever at Coulter's to obstruct my progress, a mere shack of a house standing on the river's bank, a blacksmith shop, and a small store. At this early hour no sign of life was visible, not even a dog barked, and I followed the poorly marked road, which circled sharply to the left for a hundred yards, and ended at the water's edge. So far as could be discovered the opposite bank was equally deserted, and, after permitting the roan to drink all I considered safe in his heated condition, I made the passage, the water where deepest wetting the horse's belly. The main roadway led directly

northward, but, perhaps a quarter of a mile beyond the ford, I came upon a branch heading in the direction I desired to go, and, spurring my mount into a swifter stride, turned into it. The sun was reddening the sky by this time, our surroundings becoming plainly visible. The country traversed was rough, the road running along a break in the broken lands bordering the valley, with bits of thick wood on either hand, and numerous outcropping rocks. It would have been difficult of passage in the darkness, but now in daylight it offered little obstruction, the surroundings of the track leaving us comparatively safe from observation. Two hours later, still urging the tired steed remorselessly forward, I arrived at a cross-roads, and a Federal picket.

So sudden was the unexpected encounter that I barely halted within range of his gun, the startled fellow so convinced the enemy was upon him I expected a shot before I could begin explanations. He was a soldier of the Forty-second Illinois, Sheridan's Division; and, after five minutes of controversy, the boyish-looking corporal, who came running forward at the sentry's first call, consented to escort me in person to his regimental headquarters. From the Colonel's tent I was very promptly passed beyond to where Sheridan was taking breakfast on the rude porch of a log house, several of his staff clustered about him. Here I passed through some minutes of rapid questioning, and was finally despatched westward, astride a fresh horse, and accompanied by an aide. It was slightly after eight o'clock when we arrived in the presence of Rosecrans. For a moment the General scanned

the brief note handed him by the aide; then he looked up, carefully scrutinizing my face with his quiet gray eyes.

"What is your name?"

"King, sir."

"You claim to have been a sergeant in Reynolds's Battery, I understand?"

"Yes, sir."

He turned quickly to an officer at the end of the table.

"Morton, step outside, and request Lieutenant McDermott to come here for a moment."

We waited in silence, the General nervously rustling some loose papers about on the table before him, and whispering short, snappy sentences to a man in a major's uniform seated beside him. Perhaps ten minutes thus elapsed before Morton returned with his man. Rosecrans glanced up inquiringly at the latter, and then over toward me.

"Lieutenant," he said quietly, "kindly inform us if you have ever seen this man before."

The officer thus addressed stepped over toward me, confused by the light, as well as the Confederate uniform I wore, then his bronzed face broke into a smile, and he extended his hand.

"By Heavens, King, but I am glad to see you alive and safe again; we had you marked down as 'killed, or missing,' and there are mighty few of us left."

"He belonged to you, then?" It was the voice of the General, breaking in impatiently upon our greeting.

"This man is Sergeant Elbert King, of Reynolds's Battery, sir," answered McDermott, turning instantly to-

ward him, yet still retaining my hand clasped tightly within his own.

"Very well; now, Sergeant King, we are prepared to listen to your story."

I told it swiftly, realizing the value of time, and inspired by the interest I immediately perceived depicted in the faces clustered about. I related merely what they needed to know from the military view-point, leaving out all reference to the girl, except to mention that she was the cause of Lieutenant Dunn's night ride. At the end of my narrative both Rosecrans and the Major questioned me sharply, but I was able to answer most of their queries with convincing clearness.

"You report," pursued the questioning Major finally, "that the plan, as you understood it, was to double the Confederate right wing to the rear past their centre last night; then, that during to-day, and under protection of those bluffs yonder, the centre will also be moved to the left, thus massing their entire fighting force just back of Minersville soon after dark, with the intention of hurling it in solid mass against our unprepared right flank at daybreak to-morrow? Do I state this correctly?"

"That was my understanding, sir."

"Yet our pickets have reported no movement apparent in their front; camp-fires were burning the full length of the Confederate lines from Minersville to Coulter's Landing all through the night."

"Then the most of them must have been dummy fires, sir, for I rode from Denslow's plantation to Coulter's without encountering a single man. I am positive that

after midnight there was not a Confederate company left on duty east of Salter's Creek. A few men may have been detailed to keep the fires going, but their regiments were certainly already on the march westward."

Rosecrans was leaning stiffly back in his chair, tapping on the table with the blunt end of a pencil, his keen eyes constantly studying my face. Suddenly he glanced over toward the group of officers standing clustered in the doorway.

"Captain Geer, were any of your scouts across the river last night?"

"Daniels, sir."

"Bring him in."

He arrived shortly, still rubbing his eyes, as though just awakened from sleep, as odd-appearing a specimen of the typical mountain white as ever I saw,— long, loosely jointed limbs, narrow, stooped shoulders, bushily whiskered face intensely solemn in expression and strangely wrinkled, yet ornamented with keen blue eyes containing some shrewd humor in their depths. His clothes were as nondescript as his appearance, and he came slouching forward carelessly, his gaze wandering over the group gathered in the room.

"Daniels," and the General's stern voice instantly commanded his attention, "Captain Geer tells me you were across the river during the night. What did you discover?"

"Wal, Gin'ral," he piped out in a mere squeak of a voice, which sounded funny enough, although no one laughed, "I reckon I did n't pick up nothin' worth talkin'

'bout. Long maybe 'bout ten o'clock, ther night bein' tol'ble dark, I got on ther off side o' a log, an' sorter drifted with ther current, steerin' a bit, o' course, till I come in agin ther south shore. I reckon I clumb out maybe fifty feet east o' ther mouth o' Salter Crick, whar bushes grow clar down to ther edge o' ther water. I got ashore all right, an' wormed my way up to ther top o' ther bank, but thet was 'bout all I did do. Damn if I ever saw sich a picket line afore as them Rebs hed. Thar was n't a hole that a black cat could 'a crawled through. It made me think thet somethin' was happenin' fer sure, but every time I tried ter git out o' thet bunch 'o trees I run up agin a picket. I tried ter crawl up along ther crick even, wadin' in ther water under ther bank, but thet was no good. So long 'bout three o'clock I decided thet maybe I might better be gittin' back agin over to this side afore it got light."

"And you neither saw nor heard anything?"

"Not a blame lot, anyway. I heerd a battery goin' 'long, the fellers cussin' an' lickin' their hosses somethin' scand'lous; an' thar was a conside'ble mass o' cavalry marchin' behind 'em, fer their things was jingling, an' they stopped to water the hosses in the crick. I could n't git near 'nough to hear their talk. Ye see, Gin'ral, it was a line 'o fires what kept me back more'n the pickets, fer thar wan't a place but what was lit up. Thar was sure some sorter movement goin' on thar, but I could n't make head ner tail to it, 'cept that all them troops that I saw was marchin' west."

There was a long silence, Rosecrans tapping the table

nervously with his pencil, his eyes gazing out of the open door, his forehead creased with thought. Then he spoke rapidly, his mind evidently cleared for action.

"This looks decidedly serious to me, gentlemen, and I feel sufficient faith in Sergeant King's report to act immediately upon it. If it be true that Johnston is massing against our right, and has left the ford at Coulter's unguarded, this offers us an opportunity for a countermarch, if we only move swiftly enough. Hand me the maps, Major."

He studied these intently, measuring certain distances, asking a few rapid questions of various staff officers clustered about, and jotting down their replies.

"I am fully aware of the danger involved in dividing our force in the presence of the enemy," he said, at last, lifting his eyes to the faces anxiously watching him, "but to my mind, gentlemen, the peril will be even greater if we permit the enemy to carry out their present plans unchecked. If at this juncture we can only strike unexpectedly in their rear, we shall win. The aid of surprise will be with us, and it is worth much to an army just to feel that they are on the aggressive. Smiley, ride to McGirth and Williams; tell them to mass their brigades opposite Minersville, and to hold the ford at all cost; explain the situation to them fully. Wyatt, have Coit's brigade stationed in reserve in the hills back of the town. Now Parker, Seaman, Just, and Shea, start the remainder of our troops on forced march to Coulter's Ford: let there be no delay, not even to cook rations. Wilson will move first with the cavalry, to be immediately followed by

Sheridan's brigade. These will proceed by the river road, while the others will follow the ridge as rapidly as they can be made ready. Further orders will reach them at Coulter's. That is all, gentlemen."

Within five minutes Rosecrans, the Major, the scout Daniels, and myself were left alone in the room. The General stood motionless, listening to the hoof-beats dying away in the distance, as his messengers speeded on their missions. Then his glance fell upon me.

"Do you need rest, Sergeant?"

"No, sir."

"Glad of that, as I require your services. There is no battery I can assign you to at present, but I judge from your story that you ride well, and you should know the country thoroughly between the Landing and Salter's Creek. I am going to appoint you temporarily on my staff, with the rank of Lieutenant, and place you in command of the advance scouts. Major, see that Lieutenant King is furnished with a suitable uniform and a good horse, and that he and his command get away at once."

Twenty minutes later I was galloping down the river road, with an odd following at my heels.

CHAPTER VIII

WE FIND THE COURIER

THE column of cavalry was already advancing, ploughing their way through yellow spirals of dust, the men eager with the thrill of participating in an important movement. Half way to Coulter's my little party of scouts rode past the vanguard, and swung into the main road, our horses on a trot. When once safely beyond the sight of the head of that plodding column, I checked the speed to a swift walk, my mind free to consider the nature of those strange duties so suddenly thrust upon me. There was nothing at all complicated in my orders. We were merely to keep well in advance of the main body, spreading out sufficiently to cover all the country within eyesight, seeking thus to prevent any possible knowledge of our movement being borne to the ene my's camp. But this service would not be important until we were well across the river. I glanced about at the small squad over whom I had been appointed in temporary command. There were twenty all told, exceptionally well mounted, I observed at a glance, but of so varied characteristics, and such peculiarity of dress, as to form a rather remarkable medley. There was, to be sure, a semblance of uniform, but exhibiting marks of rough service, and representative of every department, so that no

two men appeared similarly attired. Yet they had a sturdy and resolute fighting appearance which pleased me, and had all, without doubt, proved their value in hazardous service.

Perhaps a dozen were unmistakably of the mountain white type,— gaunt, unshaven, slow of speech, their keen, restless eyes searching every covert for a possible enemy in ambush; the others were mostly young, reckless-looking fellows, picked from the ranks of various organizations because too restless for the discipline of regular command. Someway they apppealed to me, and I felt a hope that I might be retained in command, and thus given opportunity to test their mettle. Back of Daniels, who slouched carelessly in the saddle peering out suspiciously from under the broad flapping brim of his hat, rode a red-headed, freckle-faced boy of eighteen, his eyes dancing with the merriment of unrestrained dare-deviltry, evidently from his dress originally a trooper. Beside him was a pudgy, broad-shouldered, round-faced man of thirty, whose previous life had apparently been that of the farm, with large black eyes glowing feverishly beneath his cap visor. The faces were principally American, yet of greatly varying types, one or two aristocratic enough to win a second glance, but all bronzed by exposure, and marked by that alertness born of individual action. They rode in open order, careless as to military form, scarcely exchanging words, yet leaving upon my mind an impression that they were prepared at any time to try me out, and would obey my orders only so far as I made good according to their rough and ready standards. The

knowledge that I must control by personality, rather than military rank, brought with it a new sense of responsibility, and a desire to test my authority.

"Daniels," I said, drawing back my horse till I rode beside him, "this looks an odd command given me. What are they — enlisted men?"

"Some of 'em are," he answered slowly, shifting his eyes over the rabble behind, "but ther mountain men mostly are jus' volunteer scouts, picked up yere in ther deestrict 'cause they know ther way 'round. I reckon maybe it 's a tough-lookin' outfit from a sojerin' pint o' view, but thar 's some damn good scouts a-ridin' thar behin' yer."

"Some of them appear mere boys."

"Sure they do, an' they're ther sort what takes chances whar a grown man would have a nerve fit. That yallerheaded feller thar has been mostly my partner lately; he 's Irish, name Con O'Brien; deserted twice from ther Ninth Illinois Cavalry, but since they put him scoutin' thar ain't no job too blame hard fer him ter tackle. I tell ye, Leftenant, scouts is born, not made."

"Yes," I said, my blood tingling as I recalled to mind those stories of adventures between the lines frequently related around the camp-fire, "and from all I learn, you are one thus born. I've heard of you often enough. You have had some thrilling experiences."

"Oh, tol'ble, tol'ble."

"How long have you been at it?"

"Oh, mostly since the war begun; I started in with Buell in Kentucky."

"You came from up there?"

He looked at me almost suspiciously, then his eyes shifted to the scene in front.

"I reckon I was born 'bout ten mile from yere, over yonder on ther east ridge." His eyes narrowed, a new light visible within their depths. "It was jist ter git back yere, with sich an outfit as this yere ahind me, thet made me a sojer," he acknowledged slowly. "I got some private work ter do in this yere kintry."

"A feud?"

"I reckon thet 's whut ye call it. Maybe it 's bin a hundred years runnin', an' has caused a heap o' killin' one way an' 'nother, but it 's sorter simmered down ther las' two year to Jem Donald an' me. Whin this yere war broke out, he sorter took to ther Confed side, an' thet naturally made me a Yank. They hed ther best o' it 'round yere in them days, an' arter a while I skipped. But I'm back yere now, an' I ain't skulkin' 'round alone neither. I reckon I've got an ol' woman an' some kids down thar on Salt Crick, if ther house ain't been burnt over 'em 'fore now; an' if it has, God pity Jem Donald. I reckon he 'll hear from me soon 'nough anyhow."

There was a grimness in these words spoken deliberately, the tone utterly expressionless, which I cannot properly convey in written language — the glint of the eye, the compression of the thin lips, making the deadly meaning perfectly apparent. It was the unyielding hate of savagery, long brooding over past wrongs. Involuntarily I glanced about into the fringe of woods.

"Is Donald about here, then?"

"Who? Big Jem Donald? Sure; 'h ain't ye never heard o' him?"

I shook my head, hoping thus to lead him on to his story, but the natural taciturnity of the mountaineer restricted him to a few brief sentences.

"Wal, ye will if ye 're long in this kintry. I 've heern as how Jem hed a commish from ther Confeds, an' was runnin' a sorter independent command. Anyhow he 's got quite a parcel o' men, mainly deserters an' sich truck, thet he hes ther bossin' of, an' jist 'bout controls all thet kintry thar east o' ther ridge." He swung his hand in a half-circle over the landscape in front. "I reckon, Leftenant, it would be a mighty good thing fer ther Union if some o' us could ketch thet cuss an' hang him to ther first tree."

His peculiar voice was so intense with passion, that I could not forbear saying,

"What is the special trouble between you and this Big Donald, Daniels?"

"Darn if I know whar it started," he acknowledged, as though the thought came to him almost as a surprise. "It was 'fore my dad's time, I reckon, an' seems ter me it was over a lot o' hawgs thet got rootin' up some corn down on Rock Crick. Thet 's whar ther Danielses an' Donalds lived in them days, but blame if I know which one owned ther corn, an' which owned ther hawgs. Hell, it don't make no difference, fer ther whole kit an' caboodle are dead long ago. Ther Donalds were well off in them days; hed a fine plantation, with a big house on it, an' maybe a hundred slaves. Ther Danielses was allers pore,

but thar was a monstrous lot o' us scattered 'long Rock Crick, an' when they went gunnin' fer ther Donalds they gin'rally got 'em. All I know is, thet when I come 'long, 'bout a hundred years later, ther Donalds was livin' in a log shack back o' Bald Mountain, an' ther fight was still a goin' on. My dad was shot down at Milliken Bend by one o' ther crowd when I was eight year old; then my brother got ol' man Donald somewhar on ther trail, an' filled him full o' buckshot. Ther next thing, they set fire to our house, when nobody but mam was to hum. She shot into ther bunch, and got away with a broken arm, hidin' out in ther bush fer a week. Then ther Danielses rode over ter Bald Mountain, an' we come pretty damn near puttin' ther Donald tribe outer business, until a gang o' 'em ambuscaded us one night in ther bottoms. I got two bullets in thet fracas, an' my brother was killed. 'Bout thet time ther war broke out. Damned if I keered which side licked in ther war, but Jem Donald come out fer ther Confeds, an' so I went in fer ther Union. Wal, we fought it out yere fer maybe six months, but ther odds was all with his outfit; thar wan't many Danielses left able ter tote a gun; an' finally I skipped out, and jined Buell."

"The Secession sentiment was strong through this section, I suppose?"

"Wal, I don't know 'bout thet. Ther mountain men mostly did n't care much; mighty few o' 'em owned any niggers. But ther gentry was with ther Secessionists, an' Big Donald allers kinder nat'rally belonged to thet bunch. He never did chum with ther mountain men much, but somehow managed ter be mighty thick with ther Den-

slows an' ther Dunns, an' all thet lot along ther river yere. I 've heern tell as how Jem Donald's wife was a Denslow, but I don't never remember seein' her."

This mention of the name of Denslow brought up before me instantly the face of the young girl whom I had left a few hours before. So she also was, in a way, connected with this fierce mountain feud which had already cost so many lives. I had reason to know she was of fighting blood, yet it was seemingly impossible to connect her directly with such savagery.

I was busily thinking still, as we forded the river and came straggling up the other bank, our horses glistening in the sunshine. Coulter's Landing was apparently deserted of all inhabitants; back along the opposite shore we could see the dust cloud rising above the column of advancing cavalry. A few brief orders scattered my nondescript command to right and left, Daniels and I riding alone along the road leading up toward the ridge, watchful that the others covered thoroughly the country on either side of us. We were a mile in advance when Wilson's men first began taking water at the ford.

The knowledge of what our rapid movement meant gave zest to this advance scouting, and we pushed forward alert to any suspicious happening in our front. I observed how old Daniels's eyes narrowed like those of a cat, as he scanned the hills, peering out from beneath the brim of his slouch hat, his thin lips drawn back so as to reveal the yellow teeth. For the first time he became revealed to me as a savage, living merely for revenge, merciless and

unforgiving. To him the war was only a greater feud, bringing with it a long-sought opportunity for vengeance against his enemies. Somehow the very thought sickened me; yet, although I turned away, striving to concentrate my attention on other matters, my eyes invariably came roving back to observe his wrinkled face, his thin set jaws, and his gaunt form slouching in the saddle. Twice I spoke, hoping to break the spell, but he answered only in gruff monosyllables, oblivious apparently to everything except that he was again back on the old familiar ground, ever drawing nearer to those he hated with an intensity I could not comprehend. However much of a soldier his long service had made him, all was now forgotten, and he had returned to the bitterness of his mountain feud. He would hunt and kill as the beast hunts and kills — treacherously, and from covert. Yet he was alert enough and watchful, his keen eyes being first to observe the signal of some discovery waved back from a scout far away to the left, who suddenly tipped a distant ridge, a mere black dot among the rocks.

"What is it, Daniels?"

"Ther feller out thar is wavin' us over. He 's run up agin something that 's made him need help, I reckon."

We rode straight across the upland, side by side, I spurring cruelly to keep my horse even with his raw-boned mount, both intently watching the movements of the man who had signalled. As we struck the ridge he came toward us on a lope.

"It 's O'Brien," I said, as soon as my eyes clearly revealed his identity.

"O' course it is; I saw that back yonder, an' he don't never wigwag without thar 's reason fer it, thet boy."

We met at the edge of a ravine, our horses jerked back sharply.

"What is it, O'Brien?"

He waved his hand backward. "There 's a house down there in the hollow, without nobody livin' in it, just a shack of a place, but Oi thought maybe Oi bether look inside afore Oi went by; an thar 's a dead man lyin' there: Oi had to push the body aside to get the door open."

"A soldier?"

"Naw; one o' Daniels's sort, Oi reckon."

"Killed?"

"Shot through the head."

I spurred my horse around the end of the ravine, Daniels keeping close at my heels. Apparently he needed no guide, for, as we drew up to where O'Brien waited, the old scout pressed straight forward up a cleft in the ridge, and, with a nod to the boy, I followed silently.

The house, a rude log affair with dilapidated lean-to, occupied a little hollow, partly overgrown with underbrush, and was not easily discernible against the brown background of the hills. The ridge cleft, however, led almost directly to the door, which stood ajar. Daniels swung down from the saddle and disappeared within. Following I found him bent above the prostrate figure of a man, lying upon its back, a haggard face, covered by a straggly iron-gray beard, staring with sightless eyes up into the black shadows of the rafters. The light was dim, being merely that which streamed in through the

partially opened door, but I could perceive no signs of previous occupancy excepting a rude table, and a single overturned chair. Daniels glanced up at me, his face expressionless.

"It 's one o' ther Farley boys," he announced quietly, "an' he was shot in ther back o' ther head."

"You knew him, then?"

"Wal, I reckon; he was a cousin o' mine," grimly. "He was hidin' out over Bald Mountin way, an' I wonder whut ther hell he was doin' yere."

He stooped down suddenly, and pressed open one of the dead man's tightly clinched hands. I caught the flutter of a white slip of paper as it fell to the floor. The scout picked it up, gazing at it blankly.

"Thar 's some writin', thar, sir, but it don't do me no good, 'cause I can't read."

I took the paper, and leaned back to where the light revealed the writing. The paper was an irregular strip, evidently torn from off a larger sheet.

reached Rosecrans by
morning with news of
the left flank. He
t two o'clock
od horse, and
Confederate Cav-
powerless to stop
and may rely on
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I drew a quick breath, still staring down at the fragment of paper between my fingers. What was this? — a warning to Johnston of my message to Rosecrans? I could hardly decide, and yet there were words there which aroused my suspicion. And Jean Denslow, unable to ride herself, had discovered and sent forward a courier! I desired to learn more.

"Daniels, you say this dead man was your cousin; what side was he on?"

"Wal, he was agin Big Donald, an' thet 's 'bout all ther side thar is up yere in ther mountings. We ain't carin' much between Yank and Reb, but I reckon under ther circumstances he was most likely with us."

"Oh, I see; but what was he doing with this paper, then? That was a message to Johnston warning him that I had taken a report of his plans to the Federal camp."

"Ther hell! who sent it?"

"A young girl — Jean Denslow."

The seamed, whiskered face appeared to darken, the eyes narrowing, with a cruel gleam in them.

"You know her?" I questioned doubtfully.

"I reckon I do, tol'ble; but I don't know how she ever got no chance fer to butt in yere. However ther way o' it is clar 'nough. She must have run up agin Jake somewhar, an' mistook him fer one o' Donald's outfit. But Jake never was ridin' fer Johnston's camp, or he would n't a bin way down yere. He was streakin' it fer ther Landin', an' either run into some guerillas, or else Donald trailed him. Anyhow he was shot out yonder in ther openin' an' then dragged in yere."

"Does Jean Denslow know Big Donald?"

He stared at me, his yellow teeth showing grimly.

"I rather reckon she does. Whar is she now?"

"At Fairview; Judge Dunn's place."

He drew his breath whistling.

"Hell; then, o' course, thet 's ther way o' it."

There was little more I could get out of him, but he went through the dead man's clothes, after which the three of us carried the inert body outside, hastily dug a grave with a spade found in the lean-to, and silently buried the mountaineer. Within a few moments we were riding away, our minds busy with the thoughts awakened by the tragedy. To me it all seemed to centre more and more about the girl with the blue-gray eyes.

CHAPTER IX

SCOUTING SERVICE

WE attained the east bank of Salter's Creek early in the afternoon, still riding in advance of the main body, but encountering no force of the enemy sufficient to dispute our progress. Here we were intercepted by a courier, who had crossed the river near that point, bringing information that the contemplated attack on our right flank had been abandoned, the Confederate forces being withdrawn into the hills. Evidently some form of warning had been conveyed to Johnston, but too late to permit of his advancing in strong force against our front. Despatching the fellow hurriedly to the rear, we waited for Wilson's cavalry to come up, and then crossed the stream after a fierce but brief skirmish. We had hardly attained to a strong position on the opposite bank when orders reached us to halt, but the cavalrymen thoroughly cleared the enemy out of the woods in their front, finally posting advance pickets nearly two miles to eastward of the creek. Two of the leading infantry brigades crossed that stream and went into camp, while Rosecrans established headquarters at the Denslow plantation. I reported to him there just before dark, but my only orders were to send out several men during the night to ascertain all they could of the present Confederate position.

The next day served to clarify the situation, a series of sharp skirmishes proving the enemy to be in considerable strength to both east and south of our line, sufficiently well protected among the hills to render a direct attack impracticable. However, our flank movement had regained for us nearly all the ground lost by the defeat of three days previous, and the brigades opposite Minersville were ferried across the river and posted at our extreme right. Gaps in the line were filled, and the various commands immediately began strengthening their positions by entrenching. While these details were being arranged, a minor affair occurred in our rear proving much more momentous to me than would a battle. Guerillas had suddenly swarmed forth from the mountain lairs, swooped down upon several ill-guarded supply trains, driven off the guards from at least two, and rifled the wagons. There had been a brisk fight, but the attacking party had escaped with little loss and considerable booty. I was outside Rosecrans's headquarters when the first news of this affair arrived, followed shortly by a report that the detachment of cavalry despatched in pursuit of the raiders had been ambushed along Sand Creek, and driven back badly demoralized. It was then I was sent for.

"Lieutenant," spoke the General sharply the moment I appeared, "you know something of the country west of the ridge, and I am told Daniels knows every inch of it. I want to locate the headquarters of that gang of outlaws over there. There will be no end to this thing until we can strike them at the centre and get our hands on their leader, a fellow named Donald. There is no doubt but

the Confederates coöperate with him in these raids, furnishing details of men, and the situation is becoming simply intolerable. Take two or three scouts with you, and discover, if possible, where he hides out, and where he obtains assistance and news as to our movements. Don't report until you obtain what you are after; but if you need help, draw on any troops required. I must have Big Donald, dead or alive. When can you start?"

"Within thirty minutes, sir."

"Better take Daniels along."

"I intend to."

"Good; if you succeed, it will mean a Captaincy for you, as this fellow has been a thorn in my side ever since we first invaded this region. You better wait on the picket line until after dark. Good-bye, lad, and luck to you."

I left his presence nervously elated. It was my first deliberate venture between the lines, and the nature of the service appealed to me. I felt no sympathy whatever for these banditti of the hills, having myself experienced their sting on more than one occasion. As a soldier, I despised their method of warfare, and would rejoice at being instrumental in driving them from the country. But there was more than mere duty in this commission — it would take me again into the vicinity of Fairview; possibly bring me once more into the very presence of Jean Denslow.

The recurring thought of her quickened my pulse and stimulated my imagination. I passed down the steps, glancing back at where we had stood together when the

Chaplain pronounced us husband and wife, and almost dared to resolve it should yet be so in reality — the very memory of her growing more and more distinct and alluring, as I comprehended the difficulties of our position. I wondered how she would meet me again; what message of friendliness or aversion I should read in her clear, beautiful eyes. Surely whatever her heart felt would instantly find frank expression there.

Still half in a dream, yet clearly comprehending the hazard of our coming night's work, I routed out both Daniels and O'Brien from beside a comfortable campfire, told them briefly our orders, and set them to the necessary preparations. The Irish lad was noisily jubilant. but the silent mountaineer merely tightened his grim mouth, his eyes glowing feverishly. He made me think of a tiger who felt the prey already within reach of his claws, and I looked at him with a little shiver of apprehension. Much as I despised the guerillas, yet this was to be war, not murder, and I felt a strong inclination to pick another companion for the night scout. Yet why should I? Daniels knew both the ground and the man sought; he would be of the utmost value; and I experienced no doubt as to my ability to control his bloodthirstiness if it ever came to a contest of authority. Confident in my own strength and coolness I almost hoped it might occur, so I could openly assert myself. The very look upon the man's face grated upon my nerves; it was a constant temptation to me to give him what he was evidently looking for — a touch of the steel. I cared nothing for his feud spirit,— it seemed a small thing to

,— only that sort of thing was not to be brought in here; not allowed to complicate our military duties. Daniels was either going to do as I ordered, or there would be a clash.

I thought all this out swiftly while we were saddling up, my eyes observant of his every cat-like movement, yet I did not address him again until we were well out upon the ridge road, the setting sun at our backs. Then I began craftily questioning, for the better planning of our night's serious work.

"Where would you suppose, Daniels, is the best place for us to begin our search?"

"'Long Sand Crick."

"How much of a ride before we reach that stream?"

"Wal, I reckon from all ye've said that ye've bin ter Fairview. Sand Creek heads just above thar, an' runs 'bout due east. I don' know whar Donald holds out right now, but I reckon, if we took thet ol' villain Dunn, an' held his feet in ther fire fer a while, he'd come mighty nigh showin' us ther spot."

"Are they associated?"

"Big Donald is pardner with all them fellers. He belongs ter their class, damn him. Thet 's how he got ther best o' us pore fellers; thet 's how he got a Confed commission; an' thet 's how it 's goin' to be so blame' hard ter run ther ol' fox out. He'll fight, all right, an' he kin git ther whole Reb army ter back him in a pinch."

"Is there any one down that way we could trust, or question safely?"

He shook his head, his eyes dull and expressionless.

"I reckon not, Leftenant. Thar ain't many of ther Danielses left round yere now, an' those whut are are most likely hidin' out in ther mountings."

"There would be no use going to Fairview?"

"Hell, no! Ther ol' Jedge, o' course, can't do much, but thet son o' his, Calvert, is in with Donald hand an' glove, an' they all of 'em feel 'bout alike."

"But Miss Denslow is stopping there at present," I ventured doubtfully, "and we might gain some valuable information from her."

He drew up his horse sharply, his peculiar eyes narrowing as he stared at me.

"How long hev ye knowed this yere Miss Denslow?" he drawled.

"I merely met her once for an hour or so."

"I reckoned as much. Wal, pardner, she ain't ther sort thet tells things. Ye might scare somethin' out o' Calvert Dunn if ye got him jist right, but ye'll waste yer time on Jean Denslow."

"Why do you associate those two names?"

"'Cause they've allers bin tergether; them two families are like peas in a pod, an' it 's bin common talk they was goin' ter marry up; but ter my mind ther gal is worth any dozen Dunns."

"You don't think much of the young fellow then?"

"I reckon not; he 's a cowardly brag, an' treats a pore white worse nor a nigger; but Miss Jean, why she 's a real mounting gal, fit ter mate with any man. I ain't got nothin' on her people; ye kin bet yer las' dollar on thet."

There were other questions on my lips, yet I held

them back, unwilling to permit Daniels to suspect I felt any special interest in the girl. Little by little I was beginning to comprehend I was being drawn into a feud older than the war, and more bitter, the right of which — if any right there was — was extremely doubtful; but my sympathies were more inclined toward the side of Jean Denslow than toward this grim, savage mountaineer. The duty of the night grew complicated, and I must watch closely to prevent private revenge overcoming soldierly purpose. I glanced toward O'Brien, who was riding carelessly behind, whistling merrily, one leg flung over the pommel of his saddle. He would care little what happened, so there was sufficient excitement to make his blood dance, and he had been Daniels's partner long enough to side with him in case of emergency. Now that I began dimly to understand the circumstances I wished I had chosen another man.

The sun had been down an hour when the three of us rode out beyond the picket line, heading directly across the upper portion of the narrow valley occupied by Dunn's plantation toward the range of bare hills beyond. I could perceive no evidence of a trail, but Daniels evidently knew the way in the dark, and we followed his guidance without questioning. To me this silent advance into danger was more exciting than battle; yet I was young enough, possessing sufficient of the spirit of adventure, to enjoy the exhilaration and feel glad that I was there.

Scarcely a word was spoken among us, except when Daniels halted occasionally to point out some difficulties

in the passage, and, as the night darkened, we became mere spectres, moving slowly, the only sound the occasional stumbling of a hoof. The very silence was oppressive, causing my strained nerves to throb almost painfully, as I leaned forward, striving to keep Daniels's dim outline in view. We passed through a cleft in the hills, along a narrow rock platform, a tree branch occasionally brushing my face, and a sound of tinkling water to our right. At the second sharp turn Daniels halted and swung down from his horse.

"We'll hev ter dismount yere, Leftenant," he whispered, "an' lead ther hosses. This yere is Sand Crick."

The stream must have obtained its name from its course through the valley, for here it was a typical mountain torrent; we passed along beside its rushing waters on what appeared to be a mere shelf of rock, at least twenty feet above the surface, although occasionally the path led down to the bank of the stream. We discovered little to reward our toil; the remains of two deserted campfires, and an old shack, doorless and containing not a scrap of furniture. It must have been considerably after midnight when we succeeded in crossing over to the opposite bank and continued on our way. For several hours, in single file, leading our horses, we struggled slowly down the course of the stream, peering anxiously through the darkness, and pausing now and then to listen for some guiding sound. But nothing rewarded our efforts. If Big Donald had any established camp in that neighborhood, it was certainly not along the ten miles of Sand Creek which we had so thoroughly explored.

Daylight overtook us in a little cove whence we could look forth on the narrow valley, and the earliest rays of the sun fell on the scattered buildings representing the plantation of Fairview, perhaps two miles distant. My eyes were heavy from groping so long through the night, yet, in that clear mountain air, every line assumed the distinctness of an etching. It was a noble old house, painted white, and standing somewhat elevated upon a considerable knoll, the red sun rays reflecting from every eastward window. In front, and shading the main entrance from view, stood a grove of magnificent trees, the variety of their foliage indicating a number of species. An extensive garden and orchard, with many beds of flowers, and numerous vines trained upon trellises, all protected by a heavy, trimmed hedge, extended along the eastern side, running well back even beyond the length of the main building, while to the rear were the barn and stables, all commodious, and a long row of respectable negro cabins extended along the front of a grove somewhat farther to the west. The entire scene was homelike and attractive, the main house glowing in its white paint, the other buildings equally neat, but decorated with darker colors. Evidently war had thus far passed by this isolated home, bringing to it no outward damage; even some of the negro slaves still remained at work, for I could perceive figures already moving about those distant log huts as if preparing for a day's ordinary labor. Out of the broad chimney over the kitchen ell of the great house a heavy spiral of yellow smoke was rising upward into the blue sky.

In some way that peaceful scene came to me as a rebuke. I felt that war with its many miseries and terrors was no longer to be unknown to these quiet dwellers outside the beaten path of the armies. Already trouble was hovering near, and I was destined to be the first to bring sorrow and destruction into this peaceful valley. I stood there for some time, field glasses at my eyes, striving to fix details in my mind, and thinking not only of Jean Denslow, but also of the bitter feud of which it seemed to me this old plantation house was the centre. I understood little of it all,— merely those glimpses of savage memory given me by Daniels, yet these were sufficient to make me comprehend something of that legacy of hate which for a hundred years or more had descended from father to son, and left all this mountain region blood-stained. And my duty as a soldier was now involving me in the controversy; ay, not only that, but also my peculiar relations with Jean Denslow might make me a partisan. I turned to glance toward Daniels, standing grim and silent beside me, his cold gray eyes narrowed into mere slits as he stared out also toward Fairview.

"It looks peaceful enough down there," I said finally.

He turned his eyes on my face, all the disappointment of the night's useless search exhibited in his sallow countenance.

"Ther damn ol' fox will git what he deserves yet," he returned gruffly, handling his rifle, and turning his gaze back upon the house. "I reckon if they knew I was yere they would n't feel so peaceful."

"Daniels," I asked curiously, "what have you got

against old Judge Dunn? Surely he is n't directly connected with this mountain feud?"

His lips parted showing again the gleam of yellow teeth.

"What hev I got? Did n't he hold me fer murder? An' would n't he hev hung me, if I hed n't got away? An' was n't thet precious son o' his with Big Jem Donald when they shot inter my cabin up at Bald Mounting? An' did n't he head ther posse that run me across ther Cumberland? Maybe ther ol' Jedge ain't in ther feud, but he 's got an enemy in Bill Daniels jist ther same, an' he'll find thet out afore many more days, I reckon. In these yere mountings we go after our man, an' quite gin'rally we git what we go after."

"You don't mean to say you would kill that helpless old man in cold blood, merely because as a judge he presided at your trial?" I questioned in doubt.

"Him? He give me no show; he would n't pertect my witnesses; he was a tool o' Big Donald from ther start. I'd a come back yere long ago if thar was any o' my side left yere about with nerve 'nough to tote a rifle. We held 'em all right es long es it was a reg'lar mounting fight. I reckon we got ez many es they did, an' maybe more. But when they found they was fair licked, ther damned skunks went inter court. They had ter bring ther milishy down yere 'fore they could even git us. An' then they put us on trial fer murder — me, and Jim Daniels, an' two o' ther Farley boys. We had n't done no more'n ther other side, but ther Judge let Donald an' all his outfit testify, an' they got a jury from down Mi-

nersville way; they kept ther milishy yere until they hung Jim Daniels an' one o' ther Farleys. I got out o' ther Minersville jail, an' a posse chased me nigh a hundred mile. Thar wan't no use a comin' back, fer ther Donalds hed everythin' their own way 'round yere then. So I jist nat'rally waited round till ther war broke out. I sure knew ther Yanks would come marchin' inter this yere kintry some time, an' I wanted ter come 'long with 'em. Thet wud give me a better show than tryin' ter play a lone hand. Wal, I'm yere now, an' I reckon ther whole kit an' caboodle will know 'bout it afore I leave. I've got some ol' scores ter settle up yere in this kintry, an' now, by Gawd, ther ol' United States is a backin' of me."

"You mean to involve this blood feud into your duty as a soldier?"

"Wal, it seems to involve all right. Did n't ther Gin'ral send us out yere to run down Big Donald?"

"Yes, to take him prisoner as a Confederate in arms. That does not authorize any attack on Judge Dunn, or any killing except in battle."

"I reckon I kin attend to ther Dunn matter myself whin ther time comes; an' as ter Big Jim Donald, thar 's nobody ever goin' ter take him prisoner. If we sight him, it will be whoever gets ther drop first. He 's not ther kind yer make prisoners out 'er." He looked behind him at the rampart of rocks. "He an' his gang must be hidin' out over Bald Mounting way; thar 's sure no signs of 'em along Sand Crick."

"What do you advise that we do?"

"Wal, thar 's no use trampin' by daylight; we'd be

spotted sure. I'm fer goin' inter camp yere in this hollow till after dark, an' then strikin' across ter Bald Mounting. Maybe somethin'll turn up atween now an' then. What say, Bud?"

"So I git somethin' to ate an' a slape, it 's all ther same to me," agreed O'Brien, loosening the saddle girth about his horse. "'Av I work at noight I need to refresh meself wid slape in the daytoime, an' 'av I work all day, sure an' I need to slape at noight. It 's one an' the same, so I git it, Liftenant. This ould cannibal has the stomach to foight all the toime, but I must have me natural rist, or else foightin' is no fun, at all, at all. Is it refreshmints an' slape we're to have now, sor?"

"Yes," I said, confident in Daniels's judgment. "Let the animals graze well back out of sight from below, and we'll get what rest we can. I am glad you've found your tongue, O'Brien; I have n't heard you speak before, all night."

The blue eyes danced. "Sure an' the talk wus all scared out o' me, sor, be the bloodthirsty ould villain I'm chummin' wid. I thought wid ivery step we'd be into a massacre, wid a parcel o' women and chidher to be ate up. I did that, from thim things he said."

"You can rest easy on that score for a few hours, but we must content ourselves with cold rations, as it will hardly be safe to start a fire."

I was tired from the long night's tramp among the rocks, but my mind remained active, and my eyes sleepless. I lay there for an hour or more, turning restlessly, wondering how my two companions could slumber so

soundly. Then I crept silently forth from the cleft where we were resting, to where I could gaze down again into the quiet valley. Some strange impulse drew me toward the distant house; it may have been the memory of Jean Denslow, yet I persuaded myself it was hope of learning there something of the whereabouts of this Big Donald for whom we were searching. I even drove the girl from my thoughts, striving thus to concentrate my mind more clearly upon the one important duty confronting me as a scout. There would be blacks yonder in sympathy with the Union army; and if I could gain a moment's conversation with one such, it might save us another entire night of fruitless search. Sand Creek, skirting the orchard and grapery, was sufficiently bordered by trees to offer protection almost to the cabins, and I would certainly run but little risk of discovery if I advanced that far. The result might not be much, yet any real effort was better than lying around and accomplishing nothing.

I started off in that spirit, following the course of the stream down into the valley, at first keeping well concealed behind the banks, and later dodging carefully along under protection of trees and underbrush. Half way across the valley I came upon a well-beaten footpath, where the narrow stream had been bridged by a sturdy log, and followed this with increased caution, as it wound in and out among the trees, and through great patches of concealing weeds. A rail fence enclosed the orchard, but the heavy, gnarled limbs of the old apple trees grew low, and concealed my movements from the house, so that I crawled through, and advanced to where

a row of white pickets separated me from the grapery and garden. The house itself was now only a few yards away, a magnificent specimen of old-time Southern architecture, with great pillars in front, square-roofed, the long windows golden with sunshine. No movement anywhere evidenced occupancy, but I could hear distant negro voices at the rear. A trellis of grapevines ran back the entire length of the building, offering protection; thinking thus to gain view of the negroes, I leaped the pickets, and crept forward in their shadow, my heart throbbing with the excitement of the adventure. There was no sound now, only the faint stir of the leaves, as the soft air touched them, and the song of a bird somewhere overhead. The trellis curved slightly as I advanced, walking now upright behind its security, and then I came to a sudden halt, staring at the fluttering of a white skirt.

CHAPTER X

WITH JEAN DENSLOW

I SAW her first, yet with no opportunity to escape, for almost instantly she perceived my presence, and flung up one hand, her eyes filled with apprehension. Fearful lest she should scream I remained motionless, but managed to say, "Do not be alarmed; I am not here to do injury."

I heard the quick breath hiss from between her lips; the uplifted hand grasped at a bar of the trellis.

"But what are you doing here? You — you are a Yankee!"

I bowed, lifting my hat, wondering if she had caught even a glimpse of me during our night's ride together, which would now serve to awaken her suspicion. But there was no look of recognition in the blue-gray eyes gazing so directly at me full of doubt, aversion, distrust.

"I command a scouting detachment back in the hills," I explained, "and came down here seeking information I thought might be gained from your negroes."

"Oh!" her lips setting more firmly over the white teeth. "What information? Perhaps you would like to question me?"

"I would indeed, but should have doubt as to the result."

"You mean I would deceive you?"

"No, not with those eyes. I should rather expect you would refuse to answer."

She was silent a long moment, her gaze on my face, evidently endeavoring to control her nerves, and formulate some plan of action. Then her lips smiled, her eyes softening.

"Oh, no; that would be discourtesy even to an enemy. Your clothes appear rough; you have been riding all night, yet you have the face of a gentleman. I may not like the color you wear, but I would much rather lie to you than refuse an answer."

"Then I will test you. Where can I find Big Donald?"

She took a single step backward, still clutching at the trellis rail, the smile vanishing from her face, which had perceptibly whitened.

"Who?"

"Big Donald — that is the name he is known by in our army; the guerilla leader who holds a Confederate commission."

"But why should I know him? Why should I be able to tell you where he is?"

"Because he operates in this neighborhood, and because the people in this house are his assistants."

"And if I did know, do you suppose I would ever tell you?"

"You said you would — or else lie."

"Then I will lie; I know nothing of Big Donald."

I could see the flush spring to her cheeks, the swift

rising and falling of her bosom, but her unflinching eyes were upon mine.

"Where are your men?" she questioned suddenly.

"Just across the valley."

"And you are hunting this — this man you call Big Donald?"

"We should like to find him."

"For what purpose?"

"Suppose I should say an exchange of prisoners?"

The blue-gray eyes hardened, and she stood more erect, her hand dropping to her side.

"Then I should say you lied also," she returned coldly. "But we only play at cross-purposes; if you really wish to question me, why not begin?"

"I have begun, but with no very encouraging results. However, I will attempt an advance from another direction. Whose house is this?"

"You know already — it is Judge Dunn's plantation, 'Fairview.'"

"Are you his daughter?"

"No; merely a guest."

"Of whom does the family consist?"

She hesitated, biting her lips.

"Why do you ask all this? Are you gallantly contemplating an attack on the house?"

"No," I said, "we are soldiers, not guerillas. I confess it is curiosity more than anything else, and — because I like to talk with you."

"With me, indeed! You have the insolence of the North."

"Have you met the same trait before, then?"

The bright color swept to her hair, her direct gaze faltering for the first time.

"What few Yankees I have had the misfortune to meet," she said quickly, "have not been greatly troubled with modesty. I hoped you might prove a new species."

"And I disappoint you. I fear the color of the uniform, even the birthplace, makes little difference in the hearts of men: a young and pretty woman attracts us all alike."

"Do not attempt compliment."

"That would be impossible; my eyes speak the truth."

Perhaps some tone of my voice sounded familiar, awoke some vague memory, for she leaned forward.

"Who are you?"

"A lieutenant on the staff of General Rosecrans."

"What is your name?"

"King."

She drew a quick, startled breath, her hands clasping tightly.

"King — how — how strange! Do you know an Elbert King, of your army? A — a sergeant of artillery?"

I waited as if thinking, endeavoring to determine which would be best, to deceive her, or confess the truth outright. Something in her face forced me to the falsehood.

"Yes, Reynolds's Battery; he was reported killed in our last battle. Did you know him?"

"No, not really; indeed I have never even seen his

face: I wondered if you could be the same," her voice faltering over the words.

"That sounds strange, that you should know his name, and all about him, yet never have seen his face."

"He was not killed, only wounded. He came to our plantation in the night endeavoring to escape into your lines. I — I aided him."

"Then you surely don't hate all Yankees," I exclaimed, almost eagerly. "You are willing to grant some of us worth knowing?"

"You mistake," with dignity. "He was nothing to me. I assisted him unintentionally, not even knowing he was a Yankee."

"If you had known would you have betrayed him?"

"Not merely as a fugitive, perhaps: but as a bearer of important news to our enemies I would."

"And me?"

She looked at me, her eyes almost angry in their gray depths, her lips pressed closely together.

"We are enemies, not friends," she returned calmly. "I am a Confederate."

"Yet what necessity is there for war between us now?" I insisted. "We are on neutral ground, between the lines."

The girl hesitated, studying my face intently, evidently finding therein some qualities which appealed to her better nature. There was even a faint suggestion of cordiality in the voice that finally answered.

"If your mission is one of peace, Lieutenant King, I can greet you as a gentleman. I could not truthfully say

you are welcome to this house in that uniform, but we are not boors. Is your mission peace?"

Deep in my heart I wished it were, as I looked down into the clear depths of those frankly questioning eyes, but she was a hard girl to lie to, and I felt no real temptation to disguise my purpose.

"So far as this house is concerned I come in peace, but I come seeking the man Donald."

"He is our friend."

"And that leaves us enemies still, does it?"

"I will certainly do all I can to prevent his being found."

"Is he concealed in the house?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"If I return with my men, and search the premises —"

"We could not prevent such an outrage," she broke in swiftly, "but it will be needless to call your force; the house is open; you may make the search yourself."

Had I been older, more experienced, and had the invitation come from some other than this quick-witted girl, I might easily have questioned its honesty. Yet such a suspicion never occurred to me then; her words merely conveyed the natural indignation she felt at my suggestion of forcibly entering this home.

"You mean you will act as my guide? Who are within?"

"Judge Dunn, his daughter Lucille, and a few house servants; no one you need fear," a touch of sarcasm in the low tone.

"And you are —?"

"Jean Denslow, at your service," dropping me a curtsey, her eyes sparkling behind the fringe of lashes.

I was armed and I believed her. I had not the faintest conception that the interior of the house concealed the man we were searching after, or indeed any others than those she had named. It was not even to assure myself in this respect that I instantly determined to go with her — it was the charm of the girl which made me captive. I would go merely to remain in her presence, to prolong our conversation, to increase, if possible, the memory of our acquaintance. This was an adventure of love, not war, and I was blind to all but the impulse to linger. My heart throbbed fast, yet I managed to say gravely,

"Very well, Miss Denslow, if you can satisfy me that no guerillas are harbored here, I will see that you are left undisturbed in the future."

She turned without a word, and I followed, quickening my steps, until we walked nearly side by side. I could observe the contour of her face against the green leaves, but the expression of her eyes was securely veiled by the long lashes. I hardly remarked the house at all, endeavoring to think of something I might say to renew our conversation, when we came to the end of the grape-arbor, and fronted a door standing slightly ajar. A negro, working in the garden, straightened up, and stared at us curiously, but as he grasped his hoe, and took a threatening step forward, the girl shook her head, and he came to a pause, evidently greatly puzzled. Inside the door, which the girl closed behind us, the lock clicking sharply, a dozen carpeted steps led upward to the level

of the first floor, and the drapery of a *portière* permitted egress into the broad hall extending the entire length of the main house. At a glance I was impressed by the height of ceiling, the air of elegant comfort displayed in furnishing and decoration. Wealth, combined with excellent taste, was in evidence everywhere. Several doors opened to right and left; a broad, carpeted stairway ran curving upward to the second story, and in the recess behind were a sewing table and two rockers. A colored maid occupied one of these, busily engaged with her needle, but rose instantly at our appearance, her eyes opening wide as she stared at my uniform.

"Has the Judge come down yet, Tillie?" Miss Denslow questioned.

"Deed he has, Miss," her teeth showing in a sudden smile. "Alphonse helped him into de library 'bout twenty minutes ago."

"I wonder Alphonse escaped from you so soon."

"Oh, go way," coquettishly, "de Jedge sent him after some hot water."

We went forward to a door which opened to the left of the stairs, and the girl knocked lightly. A deep voice answered, and I followed as she instantly stepped within. The two windows were to the west, the curtains partially drawn so as to leave the large apartment in shadow. For a moment I could perceive little except a heavily carved library table, and rows of books along the wall. Then I saw, still dimly, the motionless figure of a man sitting opposite, and directly facing us. I could distinguish merely the face and the upper portion of the body,

but these were sufficient to rivet my attention. The shoulders were broad, Herculean, the head large, massive, crowned by a shaggy mass of iron-gray hair, the eyes looking out from cavernous depths. He must have observed my uniform with the first glance, for he burst out in a gruff, snapping voice,

"What 's that Yank doing here?"

My fair guide was by his side in an instant, her hand on his uplifted arm.

"Wait, Judge," she exclaimed hurriedly. "It is all right; he is alone, and has entered on my invitation. This is Lieutenant King, of General Rosecrans's staff."

There was an awkward pause, during which I could hear the heavy breathing of the man, and observe his deep-set eyes wander from me to the face of the girl.

"Oh, indeed," he growled finally; "then I suppose whatever you do I must endorse. You are the first Yankee who ever put foot in my house, sir, and I hope you'll be the last. What do you want?"

She permitted me no opportunity for reply, standing almost directly between us.

"Lieutenant King has a force of men back in the hills hunting after Big Donald. He came here alone, and I volunteered to let him search the house."

"What the dev—"

"Yes," interrupting quickly, "I thought you would prefer having it done by one alone rather than by a lot of rough soldiers. Lieutenant King is a gentleman, and I am sure will be as considerate as possible."

The Judge choked in his throat, his great hands grip-

ing each other on the table. He was evidently struggling with a temper hard to control.

"It will be merely a matter of form," I endeavored to explain. "We know of your sympathy with this outlaw, and I shall be only too glad to relieve you of all suspicion of harboring him."

"Oh, you do know that, do you, you young whipper-snapper. If I could use my legs I'd throw you out that window." He stopped suddenly, glaring about as though in search of some weapon; then gazed helplessly into the face of the young girl.

"I'm an old man — an old man," he confessed slowly, his voice rumbling. "I could have fought you once, but not now. Go on, and search the house; you are safe enough alone, with only a paralytic and two women to oppose you. Lord! but I wish Donald was here."

The girl stepped back, her cheeks flushed from excitement, and touched my sleeve with her hand.

"Come," she said softly, "he will only become more irritable if we remain, and the sooner your search is completed the better."

In the hall without I endeavored to read her eyes, but she avoided looking at me, apparently merely eager to finish, as soon as possible, a disagreeable task.

"Miss Lucille has not left her room yet, Lieutenant, but I have sent her word, and the upper portion of the house will be prepared for your inspection by the time we have finished the lower. With the exception of the library, where you have already been, these rooms are all un-

occupied, the doors unfastened. Please examine them for yourself."

"I feel quite ashamed of thus intruding —" I began, conscious of the growing restraint in her manner.

"It is unnecessary to apologize. I have long since learned this part of the incivility of war. My own home has been searched often enough by your soldiery. It is to save this house from such outrage that I have asked you to act in person."

"And I shall perform my duty with all respect."

I felt the swift glance of her veiled eyes was full of thanks, but the long lashes drooped so quickly that I gained barely a glimpse of the blue-gray depths. Yet even this set my heart throbbing as I opened the door nearest my hand. It was the front parlor, the furniture covered with linen protectors, a large, but gloomy apartment, with all the curtains closely drawn to shut out the sunlight. A single glance revealed its emptiness. In similar manner I examined the music room, the family sitting-room, the private chamber of the Judge, and a dining-room of regal proportions. To most of these I devoted no more than a cursory glance, but wherever doors appeared I entered and made certain of what they concealed, although Miss Denslow did not leave the hall, or endeavor, in any way, to accompany me. By this time we were beyond the foot of the stairs, nearly at the rear end of the great hall, and, as I emerged from the dining-room, she pointed to a small door farthest to the left.

"This is being utilized as a store room, and the key

is kept in the kitchen. If you care to look inside I will get it for you."

"Now I have begun I should like to make a thorough job."

"Very well."

She was back in a moment, inserting the key in the lock. The room was dark, and I took a single step within, feeling in my pocket as I stood there for a match case. I had it open in my hand, still peering curiously into the black shadows, when the door crashed behind me, and I heard the sharp click of the key in the lock. An instant I balanced there, helpless from sudden surprise; then I hurled my body against the unyielding wood.

CHAPTER XI

AN EFFORT TO ESCAPE

FOR the first moment I doubted everything; it must be some mistake; a sudden gust of wind had slammed the door shut. I could not conceive this as the deliberate act of Jean Denslow. I even called her name, believing she would hasten to release me. But there was no response, no sound of any kind from without, and the truth came, forcing itself upon me, that I had been deliberately deceived, treacherously imprisoned. The knowledge of the girl's deceit hurt me more at first than my own physical condition. I had been hoping for something better; even dreaming that she manifested an interest in me despite my uniform. But now all this was rudely shattered. Yet how could I justly blame her? She had merely performed what she considered a duty, and I had blindly walked into the trap. That I had been a fool was surely no fault of hers. Even as I hammered away on the oaken door there came to me a glimmering of her motives, a respect for her action. I was nothing to her mind; merely an inquisitive Yankee officer searching for one she knew, one she felt obligated to protect. The man might even be concealed within the house; or if not, some clue leading to his whereabouts was to be discovered there. If this was true then the girl had

done right to trap me, to lead me on, to make me prisoner. She had pretended no interest in me; she had not led me into this by any miserable deceit; she was in no way to be blamed because I imagined her flushed cheeks and downcast eyes meant something other than they did. No doubt she was laughing at me now, and I hated the thought of that, yet she had fairly outwitted me, and I deserved the ridicule for proving such a fool.

I stopped my senseless battering at the door, searching the floor for the match case dropped in my first excitement, and then, as a match flared yellow, I glanced about at my prison. It was a square room of medium size, the walls and ceiling of polished oak, a few pieces of furniture piled in one corner, a boarded-up fireplace opposite with mantel above, and a single window, tightly closed by an outside shutter. I struck match after match examining everything carefully, yet this was the sum total of my discoveries; there was no way out, and the fact that not the slightest sound reached me suggested an unusual thickness of walls. A bit unnerved, I found a chair which would sustain my weight, and sat down, endeavoring to think. But in truth there was little enough to reflect over under those circumstances. No regret could aid me, and any attempt at planning seemed equally valueless. So far as I could determine I was helpless, and could only await, as patiently as possible, the will of my captors. Indeed, the longer I considered the conditions the less I feared the results. I could hardly have been thus imprisoned with any serious intention of delivering me over to the Confederate authorities, or even to the tender

mercies of the mountain guerillas. Believing I had a force of men close at hand, these people would expect swift reparation for such an act, even the destruction of their home. Probably I should be held merely long enough for them to prepare better for a search of the house, and then set free with profuse apology. Satisfied in my own mind that this would be the outcome, I lit my pipe and settled back in the chair, endeavoring to become as comfortable as possible.

Yet as time passed — a long time it seemed to me in that black silence — restlessness and doubt overcame my earlier philosophy. I grew hungry, but there was no turning of the lock, no thrusting in of food through the partly opened door. My captors knew I was armed, and beyond doubt feared I would make a desperate break for liberty at the slightest opportunity. But how long was this to continue? Surely several hours had already passed, ample time in which to clear the premises of all incriminating evidence. The silence and darkness combined to irritate my nerves; to make moments appear endless. I began to have other suspicions, to lose my faith even in Jean Denslow. Black as was that interior I was still able to pace restlessly back and forth in the cleared space extending from wall to wall, timing my steps until I knew exactly when to turn. Once I wheeled about a trifle to the right of the straight course, and a board rasped slightly beneath the weight of my foot. I stopped instantly at the sound, dropping upon my knees to feel with my fingers along the smooth surface. There was not much to encourage — a single strip of flooring, slightly warped at the

joint. Scarcely hoping for any practical result, but merely to occupy time, I began digging out the dirt which had become packed hard in the narrow space, and even succeeded in splitting off a sliver from the plank itself. This afforded purchase for my fingers, and after what must have been a full half-hour of diligent effort, I got a broken chair leg wedged into the orifice in such a manner as to utilize it as a lever.

I was bending over this crude contrivance, fearful to exercise my strength lest the sharp snap of the board might sound an alarm, when suddenly the door was unlocked, opened hastily a foot or two, and something slid forward along the floor. I sprang to my feet, staring in the direction of the sound, but the door was as quickly swung shut, and I had perceived no reflection of daylight from the hall beyond. Could it be night already? I lit a match, locating a plate heaped with food, and a small pot of smoking hot coffee on the floor, and took a glance at my watch. Eight-thirty; I had been imprisoned all of ten hours! Why, I must have slept, although I had no recollection of having done so. Ten hours; then surely I was not being held merely to let others escape; there was something much more serious than I had hitherto suspected in my situation. Where could Daniels and O'Brien be all this time? Would they divine where I had wandered while they slept, and come searching after me? Or what would they think of my unexplained absence? More and more clearly I comprehended the utter foolhardiness which had placed me in this unpleasant predicament; which had left me so completely isolated from any assistance. If there

was any way whatsoever of escape I must discover it alone, and with the smallest possible delay. I ate like a famished wolf, the abundance of food, together with the pot of steaming coffee, yielding me new courage and strength. There was no sound without, no evidence that I was under any special guard. Probably my captors, confident of the security of the room, felt that any escape therefrom was impossible. With heart rapidly beating I crept across to where I had previously been at work, fully determined now to test the efficiency of my improvised lever.

To my delight the board came up slowly, the only sound a slight rasping of the nails; by moving my apparatus I thus succeeded in releasing the entire length of the plank. Except for the joists I could feel nothing below, yet it was necessary to dislodge a second board before I could succeed in squeezing my body through the narrow opening. With the purchase I now had this was not a difficult operation, although the board selected snapped sharply under the strain. Apparently the sound was unheard, and, after waiting several minutes, I swung down through the opening thus made, and let go my hold. The fall could not have been more than a few feet, yet my knees doubled under as I struck, and I pitched forward upon my hands. I was in a cellar, the floor paved with irregular blocks of stone, the side walls of solid plaster. I felt my way cautiously around the three sides of the place before discovering the door, which stood ajar, opening forth into a second apartment, not greatly dissimilar, although more littered up with various odds and ends. It was with difficulty I found passage amid the

numerous boxes and bags obstructing the floor, but, by keeping one hand pressed against the side wall, I arrived finally at the opposite entrance. This door was closed, but unlocked, opening into the narrow hall through which Miss Jean had first conducted me into the house.

My heart bounded with exultation as I struck a match, and recognized my surroundings. The exit leading to the garden was at my right, and, before the flame died, I had my hand on the latch. I found the door securely locked, the key gone. I tested my strength vainly against its solid panels; evidently I must discover some other passage leading out, and the only opportunity would be found on the floor above. At the head of the short flight of steps I listened vainly for any sound, and, hearing none, ventured to peer forth into the main hallway. It was unoccupied, but a swinging lamp, burning dimly under a red shade, hung in front of the circular stairs leading to the story above. The shadows were confusing, yet I soon satisfied myself that no one was present to observe my movements. Little by little I advanced, crouching finally behind the protection of a huge coat-rack. I had scarcely reached this position when I overheard voices from the library, the door of which stood partly open. The first words distinguished were certainly ominous enough.

"But this is n't war,"— there was no mistaking Judge Dunn's voice. "He has no rights as a soldier, for he is not here in course of duty."

"What do you mean?" It was a woman who asked this, but not Miss Denslow, and I thought of the Judge's daughter.

"He means," said some one else, quickly breaking in as if impatient, "that this man came here as an outlaw. Bill Daniels has returned; he was seen on Sand Creek last night, and this fellow was one of the men in his party. I don't know who he is, and I don't care, but he 's working with Daniels, and probably wearing that uniform merely to gain entrance here. He 's no member of Rosecrans's staff, but Daniels's spy, and I'm for treating him as such. We've driven that gang out of this country once, and now we've got to keep them out, or have the same trouble all over again. It was Donald he asked after, was n't it, Jean?"

"Yes," the reply so low I could barely hear, "but I believe he is what he claimed to be."

"Oh, you'd believe anything. I have n't seen the fellow, but I understand he is young and good-looking. That makes virtue enough for a woman. I suppose he whispered some sweet things to you also."

"He behaved as a gentleman," the voice grown stronger from indignation. "He treated me with respect, which is more than you seem inclined to do."

"You are extremely tender toward Yankees since you rode off with one the other night."

"I have certainly discovered that the color of the uniform does not make the man."

"What are you two quarrelling over?" the Judge's voice broke in impatiently, and I could hear him pound the table with his hand. "Miss Jean has done her full duty, and needs no chiding from any of us. This man is her prisoner, and all we have got to decide is what dis-

position to make of the fellow. If I knew who he was, and what brought him here, I could decide his treatment mighty quick."

"What would you do?"

"If he 's a Yankee officer turn him over to Johnston as a prisoner of war; if he is a spy for Bill Daniels, hang him to the nearest tree."

In the intense silence I could distinguish the quick indrawing of breath, a murmur of gruff tones, and then a woman's voice.

"Have him in here and ask him then. Let him make answer for himself. Surely the three of you are not afraid of one man?"

No one spoke immediately, but there was a movement of chairs, and finally out of the slight confusion I heard a new, deeper voice speak.

"Did you say he was armed?"

"He carried two revolvers in his belt."

"Then we should go prepared, as he is probably desperate by this time. Have you weapons with you, Lieutenant?"

"No; they are in my room. I will run up and get them and be down in a moment. I feel a curiosity to see the fellow."

Crouching behind the hat-rack I caught merely a glimpse of the man's back as he raced up the circular staircase three steps at a time, but he wore a short gray jacket, and long cavalry boots, well splashed with mud. What, in God's name, was I to do? There was no hope of passing that open library door unobserved. I dashed to the

back of the hall, but the exit leading to the kitchen refused to open. Perhaps I could get up stairs before the officer had secured his weapons, and slip into some room having a window. It would not be much of a drop to the ground, and, even if I met him, it would be only one man I was pitted against, and he no better armed than I. All this flashed over me in an instant, and the next, revolver in hand, I was flying up the carpeted steps. At the top I came into an upper hall, somewhat narrower than the one beneath, a half-dozen visible doors betokening as many rooms. To my left one door stood open, the light within shining brighter than that of the hall. There was where the Lieutenant was, securing his weapons without doubt. With barely a second of hesitancy, I turned to the right, circled the head of the stairs, and opened the first door yielding to my touch. I took a single step within, and stopped, as helpless to move as though paralyzed, one hand clutching my revolver, the other still upon the knob of the door. Through the main opening, as well as the wide transom above, the dim radiance of the hall lamp already revealed that interior — a great four-posted bed, a high, old-fashioned bureau, one drawer open, several chairs and an oval mirror in a gilt frame. That the single window was open was revealed by the blowing back of the chintz curtains, while my feet pressed a thick carpet of some bright color. I saw all this at a glance, for the details are with me yet, but then, it seemed to me, I stared at only one object — a motionless body lying outstretched upon the floor.

For an instant I could not believe my own eyes; then

slowly, but with throbbing heart, I moved across the narrow space, and bent over the motionless figure. What could it mean? The man was clothed in short gray jacket, and long cavalry boots, splashed with mud. Could it be possible this was the same officer who had just passed up the stairs? He lay upon one side, somewhat huddled up, exactly as he had fallen, and I straightened the body, turning the face upward. He was a man not far from my own age apparently, a bit swarthy of complexion, with dark hair and a small black moustache. The jagged gash of a knife wound in the throat told how death had come, yet it must have been sudden, for the features were not distorted. I staggered back to my feet, still staring at him, unable fully to comprehend all the meaning of this situation, yet already dimly realizing its seriousness. However it might have occurred, this act of blood would be charged to me. The moment it was discovered by those below, and my vanishing from the store-room became known, I would be connected with this crime. My first thought was that of immediate escape; it would be ten minutes, perhaps even longer, before those others would become alarmed at his absence, and begin investigating the cause. That would afford me opportunity for the effort. But how could I go? By way of the window, of course; for there, undoubtedly, was where the real murderer had disappeared. I sprang forward, aroused to action by the fear which gripped me, and peered out. Although the night shadows were deceptive I judged it must be fully thirty feet to the ground. As I leaned across the sill my hand touched something moist, and I lifted it

to the light, perceiving the red stain of blood. The murderer had hung there an instant before he dropped.

Somehow the sight brought with it a revulsion of feeling. I was not a coward; I would not run away like a cur. If I did, and if I succeeded in my escape, it would be with the brand of murder on me. They would say I did this deed; even Jean Denslow would believe it. The very chance thought of the girl served to spur my reviving courage. No, I would face this like a man; I would ally myself with her and her friends; I would help to trace down the fiend guilty of so foul an act. I stepped back over the motionless body, and opened the door. As I did so I came face to face with Jean Denslow.

CHAPTER XII

I FACE FATE

SHE did not scream as she saw me, but her face went instantly white, and her hands were suddenly flung out in startled surprise.

"You — you *here?*"

The tension I had been through, the knowledge of what was concealed behind that door, gave me control of myself.

"Yes," I answered swiftly, "I made my escape from the store-room, and have been trying to find a way out of the house, but have not fancied a drop to the ground."

She stared in my face, her eyes wide from amazement.

"You have been in there? — in my room?"

"Is this your room?"

"Yes — why did you go there?"

"Merely because it was the first door I found unlocked."

"But it was not unlocked; see, I have the key here in my pocket."

"Yet you must have been mistaken, for the door was certainly unlocked when I came, even standing very slightly ajar."

From the expression of her face I doubted if she believed me, yet no sound but that of her rapid breathing

came from between her slightly parted lips. I felt obliged to continue speaking.

"I was endeavoring to escape, as I have explained, but now have decided otherwise and ask you to aid me."

"Ask me? Why should you ask me?"

"Because I feel that you sympathize with me; that you still have faith in my statements. A few moments ago I overheard you attempt my defence in the library."

"I — I do not think I defended you," the color coming back into her cheeks. "Indeed I do not remember what I said."

"You said you believed I was all I claimed to be, and that my behavior while with you was that of a gentleman."

"I — I could not say less," she confessed wonderingly, "but that does not imply I would connive at your escape. We are not friends, but enemies."

"War enemies possibly, but that is all I will ever admit. Nor will I ask of you any assistance which you cannot render in all honor to your cause."

"What is it you do ask?"

"That you will go with me now directly to those gathered in the library. I want to tell them my story, and let them judge as to its truth."

She hesitated, one hand pressed against the side wall, and I felt that her slight form was trembling, as she studied my face with widely opened eyes.

"Go to them? Do you suppose they will ever believe you?"

"I do not know; I hope I can make them. Yet it is

not so important to me what they decide, for the one thing which impels me to such action is my desire to retain your confidence and faith."

"Mine?"

"Yes; we have not known each other long, and I am a Yankee, your war enemy, yet I sincerely desire your good opinion. I am ready to face those people in order to retain what little I already possess. You have openly defended me before them, and I cannot run away leaving you to believe me a coward, or worse."

That I was deeply in earnest she appeared to comprehend, her eyes drooping behind their long lashes, but she seemed to find difficulty in speech.

"I — I do not quite understand," she admitted at last, almost reluctantly. "You must not do this believing that I can help you, or — or that I am even inclined to do so. I believe you are a soldier, an honorable man, yet I am unreservedly against your cause. You surely appreciate this; know that it was my trick which imprisoned you."

"That has left no sting, Miss Denslow," I returned warmly. "That you outwitted me was natural enough, and I hold no malice. The one question now is, will you go down with me to the library?"

"May I enter my own room for a moment first?"

"I should prefer not; we have been here several minutes already, and I am afraid of discovery. I wish to go down voluntarily, with you alone."

She hesitated, her lashes again lifting, her eyes plainly puzzled at so strange a request.

"I begin to consider you a very odd man," she said

slowly, "but perhaps I shall understand it all better when I hear what you have to say to the others."

"Yes," I replied soberly. "I think you will understand then."

She turned about, glancing slightly back toward me across her shoulder.

"You may come," she acknowledged, "for I am sure of one thing — I am not at all afraid of you."

My mind was full of a strange conflict as I followed her slender figure down the circular staircase to the lower hall. No doubt I was in for a stormy time, nor could I hope to clear myself entirely of suspicion. Circumstances pointed directly at me as the murderer of that man above, and I realized how exceedingly weak was my defence. Yet this voluntary surrender would surely have weight, even upon those prejudiced minds, and I had faith — strong, abiding faith — that Jean Denslow would believe in the truth of my statement. Somehow, just then, to retain the confidence of this girl meant infinitely more to me than all the rest. How quietly she accepted my plan, and undertook the carrying out of her part in it, never once glancing back to learn if I was really following. Yet there must have been a bit of the dramatic in her composition, for no stage picture could have been more deftly arranged than the simple form in which she managed our entrance. Stepping softly within the library, and drawing slightly to one side, so as to reveal me standing erect in the doorway, she announced clearly:

"Lieutenant King."

I caught it all in one swift glance — the book-lined

walls, the glass front of the cases reflecting back the glow of the clustered lights suspended from the ceiling; the heavy mahogany centre table; a wide sofa, with a man and a woman seated upon it, both with dark eyes and hair, and strongly resembling each other, the man wearing a Confederate uniform, the woman attired in some clinging brown material, which rustled, as both instantly rose to their feet in surprise; behind the table, sunk low down within his cushioned chair, his deep-sunken eyes staring across at me, as if he saw a vision, was Judge Dunn; while to his right another man — big, burly, his hair closely cropped, and iron-gray, leaned forward as if to spring, one hand gripping the arm of his chair, the other as instantly plucking forth a revolver from his belt. Even as the ready weapon flashed deadly in the light, I spoke, my hands held up, as I took a single step forward into the room.

"I am not here as an enemy, gentlemen; if I were I could have easily shot first from the hall. I merely wish to be heard, and, as evidence of good faith, I will deposit my weapons on the table."

You could have heard a pin drop as I advanced, unclasped my belt, and laid it before them; the two sank back upon the sofa, while the big fellow, still leaning forward, as though braced for a spring, slowly returned his revolver to its sheath, yet without once removing his eyes from my face. No one among them uttered a word, although the Judge was sputtering as if endeavoring to gain control of his language. I had plainly the advantage of surprise, and comprehended the value of retaining it.

"Now, gentlemen," I began, running my eyes searchingly over their surprised faces, "I have come to you voluntarily to make a statement. In one sense I am your prisoner, yet, had I chosen to do so, I could have been well out of your hands by now. Under these conditions I have some reason to believe you will listen to me quietly, realizing that I speak the truth. I could have no other object in thus coming to you. I am a Federal officer, detailed upon the staff of General Rosecrans, and temporarily in command of scouts. Day before yesterday I was ordered to take two men and examine this neighborhood, for the purpose of discovering, if possible, the rendezvous of a guerilla leader known to us as Big Jem Donald." I gazed directly into the eyes of the giant who was now leaning back in his chair. "Are you the man?"

He smiled slightly, his entire face changing its expression.

"You may assume so for sake of argument. Go on."

"Understanding that Judge Dunn had some connection with this band of raiders, I left my men asleep this morning, and ventured here alone, hoping to discover opportunity for investigation. In the shadow of the grape trellis I unexpectedly encountered a young lady, who offered to permit my searching the house. While prosecuting that search I was suddenly locked into a storeroom, and made prisoner. Thus far my story is perfectly familiar to you; that which follows may be of interest."

I paused an instant, and before I could resume, the deep voice of Donald interrupted with a question.

"Who were the men with you?"

"Two scouts, Daniels and O'Brien."

The slight smile deserted his face, the lips becoming sternly set.

"That is why we have distrusted you; doubted your purpose," he explained shortly. "What do you know regarding this man Daniels?"

"Very little; I met him first a week ago, and then merely as his commanding officer. I understand he is a native of this region, and, for that reason, was selected to guide us on this scout."

"Well, before you go on, I will tell you something about Bill Daniels," the voice low, quiet, convincing, "something which may possibly justify our action toward you, if we are guilty of any mistake. Daniels was born within five miles of this spot; he was born into a feud which has cursed this mountain region for many years. My father was involved in it, and it cost him his life; when I grew up to manhood I made every effort in my power to reach a just settlement of the difficulty. I refused to go armed; I refused to retaliate for injuries done my property. I appealed to the courts, instead of fighting it out with the rifle. But those fellows could n't understand that sort of thing; they held me a coward, and started in to drive me out of the country. This Daniels was the leader, and he had with him a lot of midnight assassins. Before I learned the uselessness of courts, my house was burned, my crops destroyed; and my wife, weakened by exposure, died. I was twice shot from ambush, and three men, allied with my interests, had treacherously been done to death. It was then I became

a fighting man. It took three years to rid these hills of their vermin; it cost blood and money, but when we were done, those mountain roads yonder were safe to travel over. This man Daniels was captured, tried, and condemned for murder, with Judge Dunn here on the bench. The atrocity of his crimes was almost beyond belief, and he was sentenced to death. In some way he escaped from prison and disappeared. The war broke out; but knowing him to be alive, knowing the threats he had made, and that the people here required my protection, knowing there still remained in the region those who would, through ties of blood, harbor him if he returned, and even assist in his vengeance, I durst not volunteer into the Confederate service. Influence gained me an independent command in this section, thus enabling me to serve both country and friends at the same time. I am Jem Donald, but I am not a guerilla; I am a commissioned officer under the Confederate Government."

I bowed silently, impressed by the man's earnestness, and his evident strength of character, but feeling that he had not finished.

"Not until yesterday did I know Daniels had actually returned. His presence would not be so serious, but my command is just now badly scattered, and he comes backed by a force of Federals."

"If I had my way," broke in the officer on the sofa, "I'd hang this whole scouting party, and have done with it."

I turned and looked at him, instantly recognizing the voice. He was Calvert Dunn.

"A kindly thought," I returned coldly, "and one worthy of a soldier. Miss Denslow, I do not really mean to question what has been said, but should feel better satisfied to hear your corroboration. Is this story true?"

Her eyes met mine frankly.

"It is perfectly true," she said simply, "only Colonel Donald has told but a small portion of it."

"Then, Colonel, I feel greater confidence in relating the remainder of my own tale. I have absolutely no connection with Daniels except that of command, nor have I any sympathy with lawlessness and murder. I escaped from the room in which I was confined perhaps an hour ago, by way of the cellar. Finding the door leading to the garden securely locked, I was driven to the main hall seeking passage from the house. While hiding there I overheard sufficient of your conversation to become alive to the fact that my situation, if again captured, would be a most serious one. You were about to proceed to where I was supposed to be still imprisoned, but first one of your number, a young officer, I judge, went up stairs to procure his revolver."

I paused as though in question, and Judge Dunn said gruffly,

"A friend of my son's, Lieutenant Navarre, and he is a long while about it."

"When this officer disappeared I sought in vain for some available exit from this floor. Finding none I hastily decided to slip up the stairs after him, and try a drop from one of the second-story windows. Just beyond the head

of the stairs one of the rooms was lighted, and I supposed that to be where he was. I turned to the right, and tried the first door. I stepped inside; the window was wide open; on the floor at my feet lay the dead body of Lieutenant Navarre."

CHAPTER XIII

AGAIN A PRISONER

I COULD see them leaning forward staring at me with suddenly blanched faces; I heard a sharp cry, as Miss Dunn dropped her head upon the arm of the sofa; a bitter oath from the lips of Calvert Dunn, as he leaped to his feet, his dark face fairly black from passion.

"You damned liar," he shouted, rage choking his utterance, "this was your work! you killed him!"

I thought he would spring at me, but, even as I drew back a single step for better defence, Jean Denslow came between us.

"No! not that! at least give Lieutenant King a chance to tell his story."

"Ay! be still, boy," and Donald rose to his feet, a massive figure of a man. "You found him lying dead, you say?"

"Yes, resting upon the floor huddled upon his left side. I turned him over on his back seeking the wound. It was a knife thrust in the throat, but the blade had been withdrawn. There are marks of blood on the window sill, from whence the assassin must have dropped to the ground."

For a moment there was no sound other than the quick

breathing of the startled group. I sought to read the expression on the face of the girl beside me, but her hands were pressed to her eyes, her form trembling. Then Donald stepped to the open doorway, blocking the only egress from the room.

"Calvert," he said in stern tone of command, "go up stairs and verify this story. Lieutenant King will remain where he is until your return."

As young Dunn hastily left the room I turned to meet the deep-set eyes of his father.

"Why did n't you go out that window also?" he asked bluntly, "you could probably have escaped."

"Yes," I answered, "and you would have believed forever that I was the murderer."

"That would n't have hurt you any; the killing of one of the enemy by a scout in time of war is not considered murder. Your army would have protected you."

"I am not that kind of a man, Judge Dunn."

"I don't know what sort you may be," he returned slowly, "but in this case it seems to me you are either a fool, or a wise knave, and there is not a very wide difference between the two. You evidently expect this voluntary surrender will clear you of all suspicion."

"No; it simply means I intend to remain, and face the suspicion. The man upstairs was killed by a knife thrust; I possess no knife. The one who killed him dropped from the window, leaving his bloody finger marks on the sill. The morning will reveal his imprint on the ground beneath. Had I followed, I might have been considered guilty, but the real murderer has left a trail proving it

impossible for me to have been the man. My act is neither that of fool nor that of a knave; I prefer being a prisoner rather than to have this foul crime charged against me."

We must have waited there for ten minutes, no one speaking, the Judge gazing full at me, as if I were a prisoner before his court, the big frame of Donald completely blocking the doorway. Miss Dunn was crying softly, and I thought Jean was beside her, but I did not venture to glance toward them. Suddenly Calvert Dunn came down the hall, holding in his hand a lighted lantern.

"Lieutenant Navarre is lying dead in Jean's room," he said shortly, evidently striving to speak calmly, yet with trembling voice. "He was stabbed in the throat with a knife, and apparently given little opportunity for defence, as there are no evidences of struggle. There is a light still burning in his own room, further down the hall, and I believe Navarre was in there, seeking his revolver, when he heard some noise in the front of the house causing him to investigate. The hidden assassin must have sprung upon him in the dark."

"You found other evidence?"

"Comparatively little. There are marks of blood on the sill of the open window, not finger marks, merely splashes. The roadway is below, and a man dropping from that height would leave no impress on the packed ashes. I found this knife in the bushes, where it could easily have been thrown from the window."

The full meaning of all this burst upon my mind in

horror. Instead of clearing me of suspicion, everything tended rather to bind closer the chains of guilt.

"Do you mean —"

"I mean this, Mr. Lieutenant King, of the Federal Army," and his black eyes blazed into mine, with angry insolence, "that you, and you only, are the murderer of Lucius Navarre."

I saw the flash of a revolver in his hand; I felt the iron grip of Big Donald's fingers clutching my arm, yet I have no recollection of moving so much as a muscle. The awfulness of the situation appeared to paralyze my every faculty; I could neither think nor act. What was there I could do? I had no defence remaining, and I was physically helpless. The very room swam before me in a mist, the faces seemed unreal, the voices unnatural. I knew the Judge spoke, and that Donald answered him; I dimly remember that Calvert Dunn demanded that they immediately take the law into their own hands; some one counselled delay; I saw Jean Denslow's face full of appeal; I think she spoke, and that I attempted answering some question. Yet it was all like a dream, a delirium, in which I appeared to have no real part. Suddenly the animal in me returned to life; I could not think, but I could act; I could break away; I could fight these devils. I struck out recklessly at Calvert Dunn, maddened by those black, threatening eyes. I felt the thud of my blow, heard the discharge of his revolver as he went down, and struggled desperately to break loose from the grip of the giant who held me. It was all the work of a wild moment. The next I lay unconscious on the floor.

I came to myself confused by my surroundings, but with mind comparatively clear. I was lying on some blankets in one corner of the cellar. Through a small barred window a bit of daylight streamed in, enabling me to perceive something of the desolate interior. My head throbbed from the blow which had felled me, and was bound about with a linen napkin. Otherwise I appeared to be unhurt. I sat up and stared about, recalling to mind the circumstances which had brought me into this situation. Bad as things were previously, I had rendered them infinitely worse by that mad effort at resistance. No doubt my returning to the library was in itself an act of foolishness, less convincing of innocence than I had supposed at the moment, but, whatever virtue it might have contained was now entirely offset by my futile attempt at escape. In the minds of all I was condemned, nor did I have a single plea to offer. Drops of perspiration beaded my forehead as I thought of those accusing facts pointing so directly toward me. I was held a murderer; the word seemed to burn into my brain as though formed of fire; even Jean Denslow could believe in me no longer — not with all that crushing evidence dragging me down to infamy. Her name lingered on my lips in dread as I bowed my head in my hands; then someway it came back as an inspiration. I sat staring into the darkest corner of the cellar, yet seeing nothing except the vision of that young girl — her slender figure, her bright, earnest face, her light fluffy hair, her gray-blue eyes shining beneath the long lashes. She was my *wife,* my *wife;* the law said so, and yet I could scarcely persuade my-

self of the truth. It had never seemed very much to me before, but it did now, the blood tingling through my veins as the recollection returned. Perhaps she would hate me if she knew; beyond question she despised me already; yet to me the memory was like a flame. I would not yield to this fate; there was a chance for fighting yet, and I wanted to live, to clear my name for her sake. All at once it dawned upon me like a revelation that I loved her; that no other woman in all this world could ever take her position in my heart. I tried to recall each look, each word, which had passed between us, finding little enough to bring encouragement. Yet she had believed in me, held me as gentleman despite my uniform, had even pleaded in my behalf. Now I must prove to her my innocence of crime.

There was but one way — escape, and the running down of the real murderer. How it had been accomplished I could not even guess, but I had one name in my thought — *Daniels*. About him alone centred motive, opportunity, inclination. This was an act of feud, not war, and there was no one else whom I could connect with such a crime. He had hinted at persecution, and very naturally I had sympathized with him; but now I had the other side of the story, and felt inclined to believe that he alone was keeping the feud alive. There was nothing in the countenance of Big Donald to make me consider him a bloodthirsty monster, and surely Jean Denslow was animated by no mad spirit of revenge. Whatever the original cause, however great the provocation, nothing could justify the cowardly killing in cold blood of

this innocent man. I cherished no liking for Calvert Dunn, and the old Judge seemed to me a cold-blooded individual, but, almost insensibly, I ranged myself beside Jem Donald and Miss Denslow, convinced of their worthiness. But I could neither serve them nor myself by lying there motionless.

From what little sense of direction I retained, I judged this cellar room to be at the north side of the house, and a brief search along the walls of the shadowy interior revealed nothing which could aid me in any way. It was totally bare, bricked solidly to the floor beams above, the single entrance by a heavy oak door, evidently barred without, as I could discover no lock, and the only window, scarcely large enough to admit the body of a boy, secured by stout strips of iron, between which the daylight filtered weakly. I went over it all, foot by foot, testing everything, feeling the necessity of discovering any existing weakness while daylight remained. But I met with no reward. Without tools of some kind the walls were impregnable, and there was absolutely nothing I could use as wedge, lever, or hammer. I dug at the bricks, tested the window strips, and exercised my strength and ingenuity in every possible manner, driven to new expedients by recollection of my perilous position; but such efforts were all useless. Wearied and heartsick I had fallen back upon the blankets, when food was suddenly shoved through the quickly opened door. I caught merely a glimpse of a black hand and arm. Before I could so much as sit erect these were withdrawn, and the heavy outside bar rattled into its socket.

I ate heartily enough in spite of trouble and uncertainty, turning over and over again in my mind the conditions of my imprisonment. What course would my captors take? Who among them would influence the others? All alike, probably, deemed me guilty of deliberate murder, yet in this time of war, in this country overrun by armies, it was scarcely likely there were courts, or peace officers to take charge. What then? Would I be removed to Confederate headquarters under guard? Or would these men, actuated as they were by the feud spirit, proceed without law, to wreak personal vengeance? If they believed me a soldier, an officer of Rosecrans's staff, they would probably turn me over to the military authorities; but if not, if they were convinced I was connected in some way with Daniels, they were not likely to extend any great degree of mercy. They had hung and shot men before in seeking to rid this region of that faction. Now in time of war, when few questions were likely to be asked, they would scarcely hesitate before offering me similar treatment. Why was I being held here all day? Were they seeking after more convincing evidence? Had they discovered trace of Daniels and O'Brien? Had Donald sent for his men? Question after question rose before me, but I could only guess desperately at the answers. I had nothing to hope for from Calvert Dunn, nor had I perceived any signs of sympathy in the deep-set eyes of his father, but Big Donald was a stronger character than either, and had impressed me much more favorably. Well, it was like the tossing up of a coin, and it was not likely to be long before

I learned their decision. Every hour of delay might aid me. If Daniels was in the house, he may have learned, or suspected my predicament, and either he or O'Brien could guide a troop of horse there from our lines in twelve hours. They would certainly be searching after me, and where would they be so likely to search as here?

I had completed my meal and was sitting with head buried in my hands, my thoughts insensibly drifting to Jean Denslow. If I could only really understand her; if I could know how she felt toward me now under the shadow of this crime. Of course I was in her thought merely as a chance acquaintance, an enemy, indeed, so far as the uniform went, yet she had exhibited some interest, and perhaps still retained a slight doubt of my guilt. Girl though she was in years, yet hers was the heart of a woman, and I felt that she would stand for all she deemed to be right in face of them all. If I only knew she retained confidence in me, I could meet courageously the rest. I was staring down at the bricks, so deeply immersed in gloomy conjectures as to be unconscious of all else; I heard no sound, and yet something told me of another presence. As my eyes lifted I saw her, standing alone just within the closed door, looking at me.

CHAPTER XIV

RELEASED FOR A PURPOSE

I STARED at her as at an apparition, unable at the moment to disassociate her from the vision of my daydream. I even struggled to my feet, without realizing that she actually stood there in the reality of flesh and blood. No doubt both look and action pictured my bewilderment, for her lips curved to a smile, and she spoke quickly.

"I am not a spectre, Lieutenant King."

"It needed your voice to convince me," I returned, bowing, and feeling the sudden release of blood in my veins. "I had been thinking of you, failed to hear your entrance, and then suddenly saw you standing there. It certainly startled me."

"You were thinking of me?" the tone slightly curious.

"Yes, wondering if you believed me guilty; hoping you, at least, gave me the benefit of the doubt. Your appearance was like an answer to my query."

"And I come in reality, not in spirit, to make response," she returned gravely. "I have every reason to suppose you guilty which the others have, only I believe such an act would be impossible for you to commit."

"You mean my nature —"

"I mean you are what you claim to be, an officer and

a gentleman. I am only a girl, Lieutenant King, with no very wide experience in life, yet I cannot be mistaken altogether in your character. I not only believe you guiltless of this crime, but I trust you otherwise, or I should not be here."

I stepped forward, bowing in acknowledgment of her words, but she remained motionless, the expression of her face holding me silent.

"Will you give me your word that I am right?"

"Before God, yes," earnestly. "I know nothing of the crime except what I told in the library."

"And I may trust you?"

"To the end of the world, Miss Denslow."

Her questioning eyes fell, the long lashes concealing their depths, but there was no change in her posture. There was a certain reserve about her manner which held me motionless and at a distance. However we might trust each other no action of hers invited to intimacy.

"Lieutenant King," her words spoken slowly, yet with sufficient clearness, "I should hardly have come here under ordinary conditions. I do not wish to be misunderstood. I am a daughter of the South loyal to the interests of the Confederacy. While I believe you guiltless of this cruel murder, yet you have entered this house as a Yankee officer, searching for one who is very dear to me, beyond all his claims upon my protection as a soldier of my country. To protect him I made you captive, and I consider you now as rightfully a prisoner of war. I have been trusted to guard you, and intend to be loyal to my trust.

You may feel this strange, perhaps unwomanly, but women brought up in these mountains, breathing the atmosphere of a feud from childhood, learn early to assume responsibility, and perform strange duties. I am going to tell you the truth, because I trust you. I have been left here as your jailor, with no one but negroes to help me to guard you. Miss Dunn has given way to her nerves, and locked herself in her room; Judge Dunn, as you know, is comparatively helpless. I am, therefore, practically alone."

"Alone!" mystified as to her purpose in such confession, "you mean, but for you, I could walk out of that door. What has become of Calvert Dunn and Colonel Donald?"

She stepped aside, again uplifting her eyes to my face, as she did so.

"Yes," she said simply, "there is no strength here to prevent your escape. I merely appeal to your honor."

Breathing hard, I looked at her, scarcely knowing what to say. The expression of her face, pleading, questioning, decided me.

"That will have greater weight with me than a barred door."

The quick flash of her eyes appeared to light up her entire face.

"I believed so; your words justify my confidence. If I ask you to serve me, and yet hold yourself a prisoner, will you pledge me your word?"

I hesitated, but only for an instant, the strangeness of

the request bringing with it a momentary doubt, as quickly dismissed. Whatever the cause, this girl trusted me, and I would trust her.

"I pledge you my word."

"And I accept it without reserve. I give you my hand in token of the compact."

It was an impulsive, girlish action, yet as I clasped the extended fingers, no such conception came to my mind. All seemed natural enough, and the soft touch of her flesh sent a sudden thrill through me. Only the earnestness of her face held me under restraint, kept me alive to the fact that some grave necessity alone must have led her to this concession. She must have perceived the struggle depicted in my eyes.

"You think me an odd girl, no doubt," she explained quickly, yet in some embarrassment. "And perhaps I am not just like others brought up in social restraint. I have seen more of the primitive, and have always been compelled to act independently. Some time I may tell you about my childhood, and then you will understand better. When other children learn to walk, I was learning to ride and to use firearms; ay! and to distrust strangers. Perhaps that very experience has brought me self-reliance, and an unusual confidence in my own judgment. Am I over bold?"

"Far from it; yet I may be when I say you are my ideal of womanhood."

The quick flush mounted to her hair, her hands clasping.

"Oh, but I did not expect that. What a poor ideal

you must have! No Northern school ever held me up as a model."

"I should imagine not, from specimens I have seen; but the colorless type grows extremely tiresome."

"Then, at least, I am not colorless?"

"Assuredly not," her very frankness disarming me, "you are as God made you."

She laughed, feeling the earnestness of the compliment.

"I must be, or I should never be here talking such nonsense to a Yankee. I hardly know what spirit possesses me to make me forget the real purpose of my visit. I assure you it was not to listen to compliments. I came in all seriousness."

"Then tell me how I can serve you!"

The slight smile awakened by our exchange of repartee deserted her lips, and she glanced uneasily at the door.

"I told you I was alone here, but for the negroes. Believing you perfectly helpless, confined here in the cellar, Colonel Donald rode away to collect some of his men, who are widely scattered just now, intending to convey you under guard to-night to Johnston's headquarters. Calvert Dunn, with two of the negroes, departed even earlier, with Lieutenant Navarre's body. There was no one else to guard you but myself."

"They intend holding me then as a prisoner of war?"

She hesitated, as if doubtful of her reply, her eyes lifting suddenly to my own, then falling as quickly to the stone floor of the cellar. The light was fading, and the growing shadows already concealed the expression of her face.

"You fear to tell me the truth?"

"No, not that; but I do not feel quite certain of the final outcome. Both Calvert Dunn and his father hold you merely as an emissary of Daniels, and would treat you as they would him, if he ever fell into their hands. We have not known much about law in this region, Lieutenant King, and men have learned to wreak their own vengeance. I cannot picture to you what the bitterness of a mountain feud means." She pressed her hands to her eyes as if to shut out the memory, yet went steadily on, her soft voice trembling with emotion. "I — I have seen so much of it; from my very babyhood I have lived amid scenes of violence — burned homes, women and children suffering and destitute; men shot down from ambush; and outrages unspeakable. War is terrible, but a mountain feud turns human beings into fiends. For years no life in all this region was safe; the murderer prowled among the rocks, even crept into the home, to strike down his victim. It was a constant butchery, and every crack of a rifle brought agony."

Her words, the deep intensity of her utterance, told how clearly she recalled it all. She stopped, breathing heavily, one hand reaching out to the door for support.

"But why should it be? We know nothing of such conditions in the North. What caused all this fighting?"

"I — I heard the story," speaking now almost wearily, "but it is too silly to repeat. Way back, they say a hundred years ago, when the first settlers came, some controversy arose between the Danielses and the Donalds. Blood was shed, and, little by little, every relative was

drawn into the controversy. Bitterness increased, as new causes for anger arose, until the original cause was forgotten, and children were born, taught from the cradle to hate the other faction. The Danielses were the more numerous, the more ignorant, the more vindictive. They would stoop to any crime, confident of their strength of numbers for protection. Colonel Donald saw them kill his father and burn his own home to the ground. But he was of a different nature; he realized the wickedness, the brutality, of continuing such a struggle. He sought earnestly to compromise, to make peace. The others laughed, thought him a coward, and became bolder than ever in their outrages. Finally they burned his home for the second time, twenty of them, at midnight, Bill Daniels at their head. They left him seriously wounded, and drove his wife and children into the night and storm."

She leaned back against the door, trembling from head to foot, yet went on steadily.

"His wife and one child died of the exposure. He lay for weeks in this house delirious with fever, and twice those fiends sought him even then. When he recovered he was another man — living for no other purpose than to clear this region of that scum. He was five years at it, night and day, tireless as a bloodhound. He had with him every law-abiding man between the two rivers, and it became so hot for Daniels and his gang that they began to clear out. Some were imprisoned, some shot, others left the country. Bill Daniels himself was brought into court, tried for murder, and convicted. He escaped from jail two years ago, and since then, until the

war broke out, we have had peace. Now he has come back — come with the Yankee army behind him — and — and it is murder again."

"You know this to be all true?"

The cellar was almost dark now, but I could see her straighten up, her hands clasped tightly together.

"Do I know? Oh, God, yes; I have been part of it. I have seen men shot down. I have cowered in darkness and rain while flames destroyed the house I called home. All my childhood was a passion of fear."

She dropped her face into her hands, not crying, but endeavoring rather to shut out the memory.

"I am sorry to compel you to review all this," I said gently. "But I am glad to know the truth. You say Calvert Dunn and his father hold me to be one of Daniels's followers, and would deal with me accordingly. How about Colonel Donald?"

"He believes you guilty of killing Lieutenant Navarre, but merely in an effort at escape. Otherwise he thinks you have told the truth, and favors turning you over to the military authorities."

"They expect to return?"

"Yes, to-night, with a squad of Colonel Donald's men."

I stood staring at her white face, now barely visible through the growing darkness. Somehow this all seemed more like a dream than a reality, and I could not grasp the full meaning of it.

"And yet you ask me to remain, Miss Denslow, to remain here voluntarily and wait for them?" I asked in despair of comprehending. "You open the door of my

prison, yet ask me to wait the return of men who are undecided whether they will hang me outright or merely fling me into a Southern prison? You really ask this?"

She took a step forward, her hands outstretched as though she would grasp mine.

"Yes, Lieutenant King, I do ask it; I ask it because I am afraid to be left here any longer alone; I ask it because I believe you are innocent, and I wish to give you an opportunity to prove it. I ask you to pledge me your word not to leave me until the others come."

"I do not understand," I said slowly, "but I will not disappoint you. I give you my word to stay. What is it you mean? How can I prove my innocence?"

She was at my side now, her lips almost at my ear.

"I believe," she whispered, "the assassin is still in the house."

CHAPTER XV

ON GUARD WITH JEAN

IN complete amazement I heard these words, too surprised for the moment to utter a syllable. It was fear, then, which had driven her here. Yet this fact did not in any way lessen the act as proof of her confidence. In need she had turned to me for help, believing in, and trusting me. Yet surely she must have been frightened at a shadow; the man who had killed Navarre had fled, dropped from the open window; the thought that he had dared return to the scene of his crime was incomprehensible.

"You say the assassin is still here? — in this house?" I questioned. "Are you sure?"

"No, not sure, but I have every reason to believe so. Certainly some one is in this house other than I know. One of the servants caught a glimpse of him, and I have seen that which has aroused my own suspicions. Lieutenant King, I am not a nervous creature, given to hysteria, but a mountain girl accustomed to see deeds of violence, and have been taught to rely upon myself for protection. I have not dreamed this, but I actually believe there is some presence in this house seeking evil."

"But, Miss Denslow, how can this be possible?" I urged earnestly, convinced by the expression of her face

that she was deeply moved. "Surely every inch of the house could be searched, the negroes would do that."

"They have done that, unwillingly enough, I fear, yet thoroughly, under my own supervision, but I do not believe I know all the house."

"Not know all! What can you mean?"

"This house was built in time of feud, and in a feud country. Judge Dunn was then on the bench, and had made many dangerous enemies by his decisions. He was always a man to arouse animosity by his arbitrary manner and abrupt speech. As a girl I heard this house contained a hidden room, and secret passages, so arranged as to facilitate escape in time of peril or attack. Calvert Dunn has confessed as much, but he and his father alone know the secret. I have asked Lucille, but she has no information, and it would be useless to question the Judge."

"Where is he now?"

"Where you saw him last, occupying his chair in the library, his body perfectly helpless, his mind apparently as active as ever, but more bitter than before because of his physical weakness. I do not think he has slept for two nights, or that he has uttered a word, except to curse the servants who brought him food."

I had the full picture of the situation clearly before me now — the superstitious, unwilling darkies, knowing just enough to be frightened at their own shadows; the characterless and colorless Lucille, suffering from a headache and locked safely away within her own room; that vindictive old man, seated helpless in his chair, his strange

eyes glaring out across the library table, and Jean Denslow left alone in the big house to cope with its mystery, the night shadows closing in. The sight of her standing there before me, her slender figure barely perceptible in the gloom, was an appeal irresistible. Whatever of service I could give would be offered with glad heart, while not a thought remained as to my own safety. Instinctively I extended my hand, and, in the sudden response of comradeship, she slipped her own into my grasp, the slight fingers trembling to my touch.

"I — I believe I am actually afraid," she confessed, as if almost ashamed to make such acknowledgment. "I never felt so before, and hardly understand myself. This is so different from a real danger — this — this haunted feeling."

I do not recall what I said, but I know I retained her hand in mine, and must have spoken words of encouragement, for when we emerged from that dark hole of a cellar into the narrow hallway, already lighted by a hanging lamp, her eyes were smiling, and the clasp of her fingers had grown firm.

"I shall want weapons, Miss Denslow," I said, as we stood looking up and down the main hall, "for whoever this visitant may prove he will be of flesh and blood, and not impervious to a bullet. You can trust me armed?"

"Oh, yes; I will get your own revolvers. They were left in the library."

She was back in a moment, and I snapped the belt about my waist, feeling renewed confidence as I found both weapons still loaded.

"And now I am ready for the worst; even anxious to go in search for trouble. What is it you wish? Shall I visit the Judge and try to learn the house secret, or explore for myself?"

"No," she answered, her fingers nervously pressing the sleeve of my jacket. "I am convinced either course would be useless. I merely wish you to remain with me, and watch."

"At least let me assure myself that no one is concealed on this floor," I insisted, "as we can then choose better our point of guard."

She did not object, although it was clear enough she considered the precaution valueless. However, the manner in which she followed me about, anxiously scanning the dark corners, evidenced the state of her nerves, and determined me to make the search a thorough one. Lamp in hand I explored every nook and corner, peering under furniture, and into closet recesses, until absolutely convinced that not even a rat could have escaped my scrutiny. Having thus completed the lower floor, not even forgetting to test the walls in hope of thus locating the secret room, I was for following the same course above, had she not begged me to desist, her voice trembling, her face pathetic as she pleaded. Through the partially opened door I caught a glimpse of the Judge at the library table, his head bowed forward as if he slept, but I did not venture to enter the room.

"Miss Denslow," I said at last, standing at the foot of the stairs, "if it is true that any one is hiding in the house, as you suspect, the fellow must be the murderer of Lieu-

tenant Navarre. Naturally I wish to make that man prisoner. I want him to come here where I can get my hands on him. Are you willing to sit here in the dark, thus helping me to draw him into the trap?"

Her eyes lifted to mine in a single searching glance.

"Yes," she said quietly; "I know I am nervous, strangely so, yet I am not afraid."

I blew out the light, placed two chairs back in the denser shadow underneath the circular staircase, and made her sit down in the one nearest the wall. Her hand was cold, trembling as I touched it, and I whispered a few words of courage into her ear, but she made no effort to respond. So silent was everything I could hear her light breathing, and the slightest change of posture seemed to start the echoes. Peering out around the stairs, I could see nothing except the darker shadow of furniture, dimly visible by reason of the little glimmer of light stealing forth from the partially opened door of the library, its slight flickering giving everything a ghostly aspect. Perhaps we had been sitting thus for ten minutes, in a stillness so profound as to be painful, when I felt the girl's hand steal along the arm of my chair, and press my sleeve. The movement, unconsciously made perhaps, was eloquent of her distress of mind, and, obeying the first impulse, I reached across and clasped her fingers within my own. She made no effort to withdraw, and we sat thus in the dark, like two lovers, listening intently, neither venturing to speak. How the time dragged, the minutes seeming like hours under the continuous strain of expectation. I had much to consider, yet my mind did not

work with its accustomed clearness, nor could I divorce my thoughts from the girl at my side, who was exhibiting such confidence in me. The slight pressure of her hand, now warm and throbbing, the soft inhalation of breath, continually reminded me of her near presence.

Was she right or wrong in her suspicion? Had overstrained nerves caused her to believe the house haunted? Or had the assassin, dissatisfied with his previous work, returned to complete his task? I was not convinced either way, yet the fellow must be mad to run such risk of discovery. Still, if he understood the situation, that the girl had been left alone, his venture would not be particularly dangerous; he had no reason to fear her or the negroes. Yet if he knew all this, he must also be aware that Colonel Donald and Calvert Dunn would soon return, and that he must act quickly in order to escape. A great clock at the rear of the hall boomed out nine strokes, causing us both to start nervously at the first unexpected sound. I counted the strokes to make sure of the hour.

"Do you know when the others are expected back?" I asked in a low whisper, turning my face toward her barely perceptible outline.

"No; they were unable to say, but they surely must be here before morning."

"Perhaps it is cruel of me to insist upon your remaining here in the dark. You could go into one of the rooms with a lamp, and lie down and rest."

"Oh, no," the clasp of her hand tightening, "I am far too nervous; I prefer being here with you."

There was that in both tone and action to urge me forward.

"It is odd you should trust me so wholly," I ventured, "a Yankee and a stranger, and one under such grave suspicion of crime."

She did not answer, or appear to distinguish my words.

"Why should you trust me, Miss Denslow?"

"Indeed I do not know," as if the thought had but just occurred to her, "only the act is natural to me. I either trust fully, or not at all. I have been like that from a child, the servant of first impressions."

"And your first impression of me was favorable?"

"Had it not been," she acknowledged frankly, "I would certainly never be here."

"Yet you have not forgotten my uniform?"

"No, although there are times when I seem to forget," her voice hesitated, yet finally concluded, "and times when I wish you would not remind me of it."

"I do not," I returned hastily, "remind you of the color I wear with any purpose of making it a barrier between us. I fail to understand why it should be. I respect and honor you for your loyalty to the cause you have espoused, and surely you can believe me equally sincere in my principles. We are what we are in such matters very largely through birth and environment, but we remain men and women just the same, our hearts and natures unchanged."

"Yes, I know. I have learned that," but with a bit of doubt in her tone, "only my education has not been of the kind to make this an easy lesson. I was brought

up to hate my enemies; to fight them bitterly, and to the death. That was the feud spirit, and we took this feeling with us into the war. The people of the mountains enlisted for North or South the better to fight out their old grudges, and I cannot wipe out in a day the bitterness implanted in me from babyhood."

"Yet you were educated in a Northern seminary. Surely you had friends there?"

"A few, but even there we of the South clung together. We are a clannish lot, Lieutenant King, narrow in our prejudices, and unforgiving. I sincerely wish I could take a broader view."

"And you do already. You are here now with a Yankee whom you trust. Peculiar conditions have brought us into sudden intimacy. Under other circumstances I could never have known you as I do now; years of ordinary intercourse would not have made us so well acquainted. We are really friends, are we not?"

Perhaps my voice and manner were too ardent, for her hand slipped from mine, and I heard the sharp indrawing of her breath.

"I — I am hardly ready to promise that. You are not justified in asking so much. I feel kindly toward you; I believe you a gentleman, and trust you as one. But I do not know you, Lieutenant King, and — and," her voice grew firmer, "all my friends are on the other side."

"Oh no, they are not, Miss Denslow; I am your friend in spite of every difference between us. So long as I live there will be one heart under a blue uniform you may

feel confidence in. I do not even believe you are as hard-hearted as your words would indicate. Shall I be entirely forgotten as soon as this episode is over? Will you not retain some kindly memory of me?"

"I could not be indifferent to the claim of gratitude."

"Nor can you refuse friendship while I show myself worthy — can you?"

She remained silent, a silence I did not understand, yet I was unwilling to accept it as a negative.

"You gave me your hand a few moments ago because you were frightened and nervous; it was a comfort then for you to feel the nearness of one upon whom you relied for protection. Will you not give me the same hand now in token of friendship?"

It seemed to me I waited a long while, my own heart beating like a trip-hammer, as she sat there motionless in the dark. Then there was a slight rustle of her loose sleeve, as her hand slipped hesitatingly along the arm of my chair. I held it for a moment in silence, not daring to utter the mad words which came thronging to my lips.

"I thank you," I said at last, "your friendship will mean much to me."

"I do not know why I am so foolish," she confessed, as though the words escaped her control. "Somehow you make me do things, even against my will."

"Is this against your will?"

"No; I think not; really I do not know. Our acquaintance has been so unconventional I scarcely realize my own feelings. I — I have n't liked Yankees, you

know, and it is pretty hard to learn to like even one Yankee."

"But you are going to try?"

I could hear the breath between her half-opened lips.

"I don't think I shall have to try — very hard. Somehow you do not seem like a Yankee at all."

"Good; I am not going to seem like one — at least not in the sense you mean."

If I could have read the expression in her eyes I might have dared more, but, in that darkness, her words barely audible from the cautious whisper in which we conversed, my courage failed. Already I had gained much, more even than I could justly have expected, and I might make a great mistake at any attempt to go further. Besides she was in my care, she had trusted herself to me, and were I to take unfair advantage of the situation it might cost me all I had already gained of her good-will. This consideration was sufficient to induce me to speak of other things, the war, the relation of Colonel Donald to the Confederacy, and her early life in this region. I think she was glad to talk, even in a cautious whisper, as a partial relief from the strain of waiting there in uncertainty and darkness, and she spoke with a girlish frankness, affording me glimpses of her character. Yet the time came when we both relapsed into silence, and I sat motionless, listening for any sound, my eyes on the thin line of light streaming through the crack left by the nearly closed library door. I felt little apprehension of any other presence in the house, believing the girl's overwrought nerves

responsible for her fear. The testimony of the superstitious negroes, frightened as they were by the tragedy of Navarre's death, carried small weight, and Miss Denslow, left alone, might easily imagine all kinds of evils. Yet there was nothing to do except remain and watch. In the long silence her breathing became heavier, more regular; convinced she slept, I ventured to discover the truth by touching her gently with my hand. Her head rested against the cushioned chair-back, her cheek pillowed upon one hand, and she was sleeping like a child. I tiptoed forward and peered into the library. Judge Dunn sat just as before, his posture unchanged, his head bent forward upon the table. Suddenly my ears caught the creak of a board sounding from the top of the stairs. I was not even certain I actually heard it, yet I stepped aside into the deeper shadow of the coat-rack, every nerve a-tingle, my hand reaching for the revolver at my belt.

CHAPTER XVI

ANOTHER MYSTERY

I COULD see nothing, the circular staircase a mere dark blur barely distinguishable, yet, faint as the sounds were, I was convinced some one was stealthily descending step by step, feeling a way cautiously through the gloom. Who could it be? What purpose could account for such a presence? I felt no doubt that this was the murderer, seeking to complete his work of blood, but how could I meet him? With a shot, ending his career with one pressure of my finger against the trigger? Or should I attempt taking him alive, thus the more thoroughly vindicating myself of all suspicion? Had I been older undoubtedly I would have chosen the safer method; but, as it was, I felt confidence in my strength and in the advantage of surprise, and was urged into recklessness by a desire to prove before Jean Denslow the extent of my courage. Thrusting the half-drawn revolver back into the belt, I crept forward to the foot of the stairs, crouching down within the shadow of the parlor doorway. Step by step the intruder came down toward me, yet he was almost within reach of my arm before I could make out even the dim smudge of his form, a shapeless shadow, but looking burly enough. A step more, and I could see a hand grasping the banister, and that a circular cloak

hung dangling over his shoulders. With teeth set, crouching for a spring at his throat, I waited, until he planted both feet on the floor, his head turned away, peering into the blackness of the rear hallway. The next instant I had him, my left arm under his chin, my right hand binding his cloak about him so tightly he could not lift an arm.

It was a garroter's grip, and I could have broken his neck had he not yielded instantly to the fierce pressure. We went down together, crashing against the lower stair, but I fell on top, confident of victory, my knee crushing his chest, my hand grasping his throat. A moment I thought him unconscious, stunned by the hard fall; then I knew I was in the grasp of a giant, fighting for my life. I clung to him madly, not daring to release my grip even long enough to grasp at a revolver, every muscle exerted, straining my utmost to hold him down. There were few tricks I did not know in the wrestler's game, but this man's strength offset them all. Inch by inch he forced me back, his grip fairly digging into my flesh, his arms pressing about me like iron bars. There were no blows struck, no words spoken — just the heavy breathing of desperate fight; the scuffling of bodies; the sheer strain of muscles exercised to their uttermost. I had the advantage of posture, he of strength, but, at last, he got me, his arms crushing me as if I were in the grasp of a bear, tearing my fingers from his throat, and forcing my body over against the wall, and my head to the floor. Never before, or since, did I struggle with greater desperation; once I gripped my gun, only to have my fingers

crushed between the stock and his hand as in a steel vise, the intense agony making me moan. The next instant the round barrel was pressed into my cheek, and I lay faint and helpless, his giant, shapeless figure leaning over me in threat.

Even as I stared up at this too breathless to speak, too helpless to move a muscle, a sudden gleam of light swept over us both, and I caught a glimpse of Jean Denslow, standing white-faced, holding a lamp in one outstretched hand, the other grasping at the baluster rail. The man gripping me turned his head to glance toward her, the rays of light falling upon his face; with a gasp of astonishment I recognized my antagonist to be Colonel Donald..

"Bring me something to tie the fellow with, Jean," he called, still crushing me relentlessly down. "The belt there on the coat-rack will answer."

I saw her put down the lamp on a small table, stepping backward to do so, yet without removing her eyes from us. She acted dazed, like one unable as yet to comprehend the situation.

"Don't you hear, Jean? Bring me the belt."

"Yes, I hear," she had found her voice at last, "but what does all this mean? What are you doing here? That is Lieutenant King, and there is no reason why you should bind him."

He brought his eyes from her face to mine, loosened his grip of me, and rose to his knees. By this time the girl, having recovered from her first surprise, began eagerly to explain.

"He is not trying to escape. I let him out of the cellar, and he gave me his pledge not to run away. He was here with me watching the house, only I fell asleep. That was all I knew until I heard you struggling."

"You released him? What for?"

"Miss Denslow was frightened," I said, catching my breath painfully, "she believed the murderer of Lieutenant Navarre was still concealed in the house. I was here in the dark waiting when you came down the stairs. I supposed you to be the assassin."

Donald laughed, rising to his feet, and bending forward to grasp the girl's hands.

"So that was it, Jean dear. And I gave you a bad scare. You must forgive me, for it was unintentional. I came back hurriedly, without waiting for my men. They are widely scattered, and it will require several hours yet to bring them together. I could not bear to think of your being here alone. I came in through a secret passage, never dreaming any one would be hiding in this darkness."

He glanced down at me, where I had lifted myself upon one elbow. "You should have shot me, Lieutenant."

"And I am very glad I did not," I returned honestly. "I hoped to capture the prowler so as to vindicate myself of crime."

"Sincerely I wish you might have proven so fortunate, for I am far from being convinced myself that you are capable of such a deed. My little Jean, here, must possess great confidence in you."

"I do," she broke in earnestly, "I would stake my life upon his innocence."

For a moment Big Donald looked searchingly into her face, then down at mine. Finally he held out his hand, and helped me to my feet.

"You shall have the benefit of the doubt, Lieutenant King," he said, somewhat sternly, "for I have reason to trust this young lady's judgment. However, as a mere military precaution I must ask for your weapons."

An instant I hesitated, feeling that now he had come, my pledge to Miss Denslow had been fulfilled; that any opportunity to escape was justly mine. This giant might be able to crush me in his arms, yet, with weapons in our hands, we stood on even ground, and I was tempted to fight it out then and there. He read the temptation in my eyes, his lips smiling, his hand extended for my revolvers. What a fine-looking fellow he was, his face representative of character, strong, manly, his entire bearing indicative of force, and cool, resourceful courage! The light of the lamp revealed his clearly chiselled features, and the threads of gray in his hair. Suddenly, in a a flash, there came to me a strange thought — here was a man to be loved, to be loved of woman. "Dear Jean," he had called her, "dear Jean." The words seemed to burn me as I recalled them. He seemed the older, twenty years or more; but what of that? The difference was not too great to be spanned by love, and he was one to appeal to the imagination of such as she. Hesitating still I saw her leaning forward, eagerly watching our faces, puzzled by our attitude. Her hand touched his

sleeve, the light of the lamp glimmering in her hair, her eyes full of pleading. My mouth hardened, the grip of my fingers on the revolver butt tightening. It seemed to me I understood: it was Donald, not Calvert Dunn, who stood between us.

"Please, gentlemen, do not quarrel; at least not here, not now. See, I stand between you."

"Lieutenant King is very slow in delivering his weapons," said Donald quietly. "He has perhaps forgotten I am the victor here."

The words were plainly a threat, but it was the look in her eyes which decided me.

"You overpowered me with your strength," I returned coldly, "but the only one I have surrendered to in this house is Miss Denslow. I give her my weapons, not you."

"Oh, as you please," his lips still smiling. "Jean, dear, disarm the fellow, and let us get at other work."

"Jean, dear," the words stung, they were so coolly uttered, so redolent of endearment; yet as she held out her hands, I placed my revolvers in them, noting the flush upon her clear cheek, the sudden drooping of lashes over her eyes. I felt that I understood it all now, my heart heavy from the discovery — her dislike of Calvert Dunn arose from her love for Jem Donald. I had been a fool, dreaming the bright, tinted dreams of a fool. But I would keep that secret to myself; neither he nor she should ever know.

"And now that I am disarmed, Colonel Donald, what do you propose doing with me?"

"As you are Miss Denslow's prisoner, rather than mine," he answered carelessly, "I propose doing nothing more serious than to see you do not escape. She, I believe, has placed you upon parole within the limits of this house. Is this true, Jean?"

She lifted her eyes to his face as if to read his real purpose behind the kindly banter of his voice; then, smiling, glanced at me.

"Yes, paroled, on the word of an officer and gentleman."

"Good; I accept the same, believing Lieutenant King will justify my faith. Now let us work together, and search the house, beginning with the library."

We passed into the dimly lighted room together, but I permitted the two to advance, thinking it best not to arouse the vitriolic tongue of the Judge, and hence keeping well back within the shadows. His was a strange posture in which to sleep so long, his head lying sideways upon his arm, with face partially upturned toward the light. Suddenly Jean uttered a startled cry, so full of alarm as to cause me to leap forward. I saw Donald lift the head of the old man, then drop it, and stare about in dazed bewilderment. The man was dead; dead, with a knife wound in the throat.

CHAPTER XVII

THE TABLES TURNED

WE realized the truth, all of us at the same moment, yet were unable to grasp, comprehend its full significance, staring first at the dead man, and then into one another's faces in a bewilderment beyond expression. To me it came like a fresh accusation, a new link in the chain binding me. Dead! killed in the same manner, and by the same hand which had stricken down Navarre! How had it been done? When had it been done? Was this man dead all the hours we sat in the hall yonder, or had the assassin stolen past us in the darkness, and committed the crime while we watched? I had not slept: I could have sworn to that; more, the posture of the Judge was the same as when I first glanced in at him through the open door. I saw the girl drop upon her knees, burying her face upon the nearest chair; then Donald, with lips firm set and white face, lifted the emaciated form tenderly, crossed the room with it in his arms, and placed it outstretched upon the sofa. For a moment of silence he stood there motionless, gazing down upon the ghastly countenance, his shoulders bent, his giant form casting a shapeless shadow upon the wall. Then he turned, and looked me sternly, searchingly in the eyes.

"What have you to say to this?" he questioned

bluntly, pointing with one hand back at the body. "If you have been on guard, sir, how could this have happened?"

"The deed must have been done before I was released. When first I looked in here Judge Dunn rested in the same position in which you found him."

"Neither of you came into the room?"

"No; not so as to approach the table. Miss Denslow thought the sight of me would arouse his anger."

She lifted her head, looking up at us from where she still knelt, tears shining on her long lashes.

"I came in after the revolver belt," she said, her voice trembling, "but Lieutenant King did not even enter the room."

Donald's form straightened, his voice gruffer than I remembered hearing it before.

"But you were asleep, Jean, when I came down the stairs. Lieutenant King had left his chair, and was in the front of the hall."

I took a deep breath, realizing afresh the peril of my position, the weakness of my defence. The girl spoke, pleadingly, brokenly.

"But he could not have done this; Lieutenant King could not have done this. The thought is impossible. He is not a murderer, but a soldier."

Donald stood between us, erect, motionless, his lips firmly set, his eyes upon mine.

"I do not know what to think, Jean," he said with a grave deliberateness, "I only know every circumstance points to this man, and leaves no doubt as to my own

duty. If Lieutenant King can clear himself I will be first to take his hand." His fingers dropped to the butt of his revolver. "You are my prisoner; unclasp your belt."

He had not drawn his weapon, yet he might as well have had it pointed at my head, as the slightest hostile movement on my part would have been met instantly. Yet I stood motionless, speechless, with hands as numb as my brain, staring into his face which was as stern and unemotional as marble.

"You hear me, sir; unclasp your belt."

"But," I stammered, "I am —"

The girl came between us, her face uplifted, her eyes shining.

"Lieutenant King is my prisoner, not yours," she cried indignantly. "He gave me his parole, and I returned to him his revolvers. He will keep his word to me."

She held out her hands, and, scarcely realizing what I did, impelled to action by the expression of her face, I unclasped the belt, and extended it to her. With the action my calmness seemed to return, my brain cleared.

"Miss Denslow is right," I said quietly, "I am her prisoner on parole, and I keep my pledge to her."

Great as the sacrifice was, the quick flash of her eyes repaid me fully, and I looked beyond her shoulder into Colonel Donald's stern-set face.

"I am helpless to resist, for you are armed and I am not," I said firmly, "but I appeal to you as a soldier to deal fairly with me. I pledge you my word not to attempt an escape, but I wish the privilege of searching the house for evidence to clear me of this charge of murder. You

are an honorable man; give me an opportunity to prove that I am one also."

He scarcely hesitated.

"And if you fail you will accompany me to the Confederate lines without resistance?"

"Yes; whether I succeed or fail, I am a prisoner of war. I understand that clearly; but I am not a murderer."

It is hard to say what influence worked with me, but the stern lines of Donald's face relaxed, his hand falling to his side.

"Lieutenant King," he acknowledged quietly, "it seems impossible for me not to believe you. I have always felt I was a judge of men, and I am going to trust you now. Perhaps it is for your sake, and perhaps it is because I feel Jean wishes me to —"

"I do wish it," she interposed softly.

"That is easily seen; you shall have your wish, and Lieutenant King his opportunity. How do you propose proceeding?"

I hesitated, my eyes upon both faces.

"I am informed," I began finally, "that this house contains a hidden room, and a secret passage leading without."

The Colonel's glance dropped to the face of the girl.

"You little traitress!"

"Don't say that," the depths of the gray-blue eyes dark with indignation. "I told him that because I trusted him, and believed he ought to know what I suspected."

"But who told you?"

"Calvert Dunn; but that was all he told — merely that such things existed."

"Even that was enough to ruin their usefulness when repeated to a Yankee. I am surprised at you, Jean."

"Miss Denslow gave me no information of value," I hastened to explain. "The mere knowledge that such a place exists means nothing so long as I am unable to trace it. I have asked her nothing, but I do ask you — is there such a hidden entry, such a secret room, and may I search them?"

The man and the soldier seemed warring in his mind before he could reply, but the man won.

"Yes, they exist; built with the house, for protection against feudists, and with no thought of war. But they can be of no service to you, as I came that way entering the house and met no one."

"You bore a light?"

"No; the passage is a familiar one."

"Yet you might have passed some one skulking there in the dark; some one who may have left behind evidence of his presence. It seems to me, Colonel Donald, that is where we should look; that justice to me demands such investigation."

"But how could any one who is an enemy to the occupants of this house have discovered the passage?"

"That I do not know, but some one has certainly been here to-night. Whoever it was, he came by way of none of the ordinary entrances. You must acknowledge that. If I am not the guilty man, and I swear in the presence of

God I am not, then the assassin must have come by the way of the secret passage. He may have found it by accident, but it has served his purpose, and a search of it might give us his trail. I plead with you for this opportunity to vindicate myself."

What he saw in the countenance of the girl, as his eyes fell from mine to her face, I cannot tell, but his expression softened perceptibly, a slight smile curling his lips.

"You have an advocate here, Lieutenant, who does not need to speak in order to influence me. I would not be justified in conducting you through this passage in person. The secret is mine merely in trust, but I will deal fairly with you. I have accepted your parole, and am going to leave you here with Jean, while I take a light and make a careful exploration. Is this satisfactory?"

I bowed in silence, fully aware I had no right to expect more. He stepped back, drew an afghan up over the motionless body lying on the lounge, and advanced to the door.

"You will not attempt to leave this room until I return," he said, pausing to glance back at us.

"I will not, Colonel Donald."

"I may be doing wrong," he admitted, as if arguing the matter with himself, "but I seem to have imbibed some of Jean's faith."

We heard his steps in the hall; then our ears followed his movements as he went up the stairs. Our eyes met.

"Your confidence in me is more than I have any right to expect," I ventured, feeling I must speak.

"Perhaps it is woman's intuition," she replied quietly,

" although in his heart I believe Colonel Donald is equally convinced of your innocence. Had he not been he would never have left you alone to my guarding."

" He is a strong man, mentally and physically; I don't think I ever saw a nobler face. It is difficult for me to think of him as a leader of guerillas."

" Nor is he, in the sense you mean. He commands irregulars, it is true, but he is doing a real service for the Confederacy, and protecting life and property in this region. No man could be more humane, more merciful. Yet he has done you Yankees greater harm than some division commanders."

" You are evidently a good friend to Colonel Donald."

" I am more than that," soberly, her eyes on mine, " I am nearer to him than any one else."

She made the confession as though it were the most natural thing in the world, without embarrassment. It was true, then, as I had suspected, her love for Donald was the real obstacle between her and Calvert Dunn. It was because of this also that she could treat me with such easy comradeship as to cause me to dream dreams. Plain as the revelation appeared I must have it yet more direct in statement. I could not yield the hopes I had begun to cherish until her own lips made such yielding imperative.

" I do not understand, Miss Denslow," the feeling in my voice rendering it tremulous, " this relationship between you and Colonel Donald? "

Her eyes uplifted to mine, frankly puzzled by my question, yet with no purpose to avoid an answer.

"Nor can I explain to you, a stranger. Indeed I may have said too much already. But what is that?"

There was no doubt as to what it was — the pounding of horses' hoofs on the ash-hardened driveway without. Young Dunn, no doubt, with a squad of Confederate troopers, come to carry me off as prisoner. The same thought was in both our minds, yet we remained speechless, motionless, until some one began pounding at the front door. I was first to find my voice.

"I am a prisoner; you had better ask what they want."

She advanced to the door, calling through the wood to the impatient man without.

"What is it? Who are you?"

"A squadron of Federal cavalry; open the door before we break it down."

She shrank back, gasping as though for breath, her hands pressed against her heart, and I caught her arm thinking she would fall. With the first throb of delight, I made my own decision.

"Don't fear, Miss Denslow; let me treat with them," I whispered swiftly. "I will not betray you. Run upstairs to him, and remain quiet until we ride away."

Her eyes, bright with gratitude, flashed into mine; I felt the pressure of her hand, and the next instant she was flying up the steps, casting one swift glance backward as she disappeared. Again the man without hammered at the door, this time with the butt of a carbine. I flung

it wide open, and faced him. My first glance fell upon a cavalry sergeant, a stockily built fellow with a bristling moustache, who took a hasty step back, at my sudden appearance, his carbine thrust viciously forward. Before either of us could speak a voice exclaimed from the darkness,—

"Begorra, but it 's the Leftenant hisself!"

I stepped out of the light, dimly perceiving a group of men and horses below, with an indistinct smudge of forms on the veranda.

"Was that you spoke, O'Brien?" I questioned sharply.

"It 's niver a wan else," and he thrust himself toward me, his round, impudent face becoming visible, "an' damned glad I am to foind ye well an' hearty, sor."

"Yes, I am all right; have passed through a bit of a rough time, but am unharmed. Who have you with you?"

"A squad of the Third Ohio, sor. They was the first blue-coats I came across when I sthruck the loines."

I took a long breath, my heart beating rapidly.

"What has become of Daniels?" I asked, peering into his face.

"Well, I don't exactly know, sor. After we'd hunted for you for about three hours or more, we decided you must have got into some sort of a trap, an' the two of us rode back to the loines so soon as it was dark enough to travel. We got word in to Rosy, an' he ordered Daniels to headquarters, an' sent me out huntin' you. That 's the last I saw of Bill."

"He was with you, then, all the time until you got back to the lines?"

"He never got twinty feet away, sor."

I stood staring at him, more puzzled and perplexed than ever. It was not Daniels, then; not Daniels. I glanced back into the lighted hall, oppressed by the mystery, all my previous theories shattered. The sergeant broke in, anxious to expedite matters.

"I'd like to have the straight of this thing, sir, and get my men back into camp. Is there anything to be done here?"

"No; there are only two women in the house," I replied, making up my mind quickly what I should tell. "When I first got in here Big Donald and two other Confederate officers were present, and I was made captive by a trick. Later I was left under guard of the women while the men went after a squad to take me into the Rebel lines. In the meanwhile there were some strange happenings here: two men were mysteriously killed."

"Killed? How?"

"By a knife thrust in the throat. In fear for their own lives the ladies released me, but we have searched the house without finding trace of the murderer. One body was removed, but the other lies yonder in the library."

The sergeant stared at me, as though scarcely comprehending my words, while O'Brien's eyes were on the lighted hall.

"That 's a queer sort of a yarn, sir."

"Ay, it is, sergeant, and the more you know of the details the queerer it gets."

I was outside on the porch, my eyes by this time somewhat accustomed to the darkness. The sergeant and O'Brien were facing me, while a number of the troopers had left their horses to be held by comrades, and were grouped together on the lower steps, the rays of the hall light illuminating their faces. I could perceive the sweep of the ash-covered driveway, the thick fringe of bushes beyond. Suddenly they turned to flame before my eyes; there was a roar, a blaze of light, a rearing of horses, the stamping of hoofs, a wild shriek, frightened voices yelling, strangely distorted forms outlined in the glare. I saw the group on the steps fall apart as if cleaved by a tongue of flame; O'Brien leaped back into the shadow, and the sergeant fell like a stone, striking me as he went down and driving me back against the frame of the door. An instant I was dazed, stupefied. Then I heard the mad yell of the Confederacy, and knew the truth. We were attacked, ambushed, routed; our only hope the getting under cover.

"To the house, men, the house!" I shouted, my voice louder than the tumult. "Leave your horses, and make for the house!"

They came with the rush of terror, leaping, stumbling up the steps, and struggling into the hall. How many came, how many remained behind, I could not tell; two fell on the porch, and one, still living but helpless, blocked the doorway. There was a crash of shots, a smudge of figures below; O'Brien grasped the fellow and flung him within, and I slammed the door, sliding the heavy bolt into its socket.

CHAPTER XVIII

AT THE FIREPLACE

THERE was no time to organize for defence, or hesitate as to action. I saw that mob of frightened men crowding the hall, some armed, others weaponless, their faces blanched with terror, not a few bleeding from wounds. Bullets crashed into the door; there were yells without, and the sound of feet on the porch.

"Into the rooms, men, and return the fire from the windows," I commanded sharply. "Lively now, but lie low, so as not to get hit. We can beat them back before they break in. O'Brien, take charge at the right — take a squad with you. Here, you fellows, come with me."

They were veteran soldiers, and the decisive voice of command was all they needed. I saw O'Brien dive into the black parlor, a dozen troopers following, and I leaped through the open library door, blowing out the light upon the table, then flinging myself on the floor as I crept to the front windows. How many were with me I was unable to determine, yet I could hear them as they stumbled forward through the darkness. Nor were we in position a moment too soon. Already hands without were wrenching aside the shutter, and the butt of a carbine sent a shower of shattered glass into my face. There was a dim figure visible, and I fired, the fellow

staggering back with an oath, his gun clattering on the porch. There followed a sharp spitting of carbines on either side, the fellows shooting recklessly, the light of discharge revealing retreating figures without, the heavy smoke choking us in the ill-ventilated room. I made myself heard above the uproar.

"Hold your fire, men; they have left the porch."

I peered out through the broken glass, but could perceive nothing except a dead body.

"How many rounds have you?"

"Forty, sir," a voice answered to my right.

"Good enough; keep your carbines loaded, and watch sharp, but don't fire unless you see something to shoot at. Any non-com here?"

"I am a corporal, sir."

"What name?"

"Masterson, Troop D, Third Ohio."

"Crawl around and post two men at each window; send the others to me in the hall. You remain here and take command, while I look after the rest of the house. You understand, Corporal?"

"Yes, sir; you men sing out your names."

The responses came through the darkness, and the Corporal made choice instantly: "I'll keep Pratt, Stevens, Williamson, Craig, Jones, and Watt. You other men go with the Leftenant."

They were still firing in the parlor, the flashes of the guns giving me a glimpse of the room as I peered in through the door, but the smoke was so thick I could distinguish little.

"Are you there, O'Brien?"

"I am, sor."

"What are you firing at?"

"Damn if I know, sor, only there was a heap of Johnnies outside whin we begun the racket. Wan or two of the boys got hit, sor."

"Sorry to hear that; have the wounded brought out into the hall; but first make your men stop shooting until they see something to aim at. We may need all our ammunition before we're done with this job. How large is your squad?"

"About a dozen, I reckon."

"Keep six of them, and post two at each window. If they see anything move, fire at it. Send the others to me."

An occasional shot, fired apparently from some distance, chugged against the front door, but as this was of solid oak, little damage was being done, and there was no need for extinguishing the dim light still burning at the rear of the hall. I found just inside the door the bodies of two dead soldiers, and four men wounded, one so seriously so as to be helpless. As their comrades crawled forth from the rooms on either side, I counted fourteen fit for duty. This number should prove sufficient for the defence of the lower story, and I hastily assigned them, two by two, to points where it seemed to me they might prove most useful, giving them careful instruction, and making them realize that their lives depended on vigilance. The house stood so high above the ground that few of the windows were accessible from

without, and, if those engaged in the defence kept close to the floor, they were in little danger of being struck by stray bullets.

Satisfied at last that every point of vantage was occupied, I returned to the front hall, and, encouraged by the stillness without, detailed Masterson and O'Brien at attending to the wounded, with whatever materials they could find at hand. For the first time since the crash of that opening volley, I now had a moment for reflection, and sat down on the stairs, my mind busied in an endeavor to comprehend the situation. Those who had attacked us would be either Dunn's squad of Confederates, or Donald's irregulars, perhaps both. If the two commands were united they might be in sufficient force to keep us busy; anyway a sortie would be impracticable before daylight. Dunn, of course, would have merely a handful of men with him, as he anticipated no more serious duty than the guarding of a single prisoner; but the number of Donald's guerillas in the neighborhood could not be guessed, and, if they had rallied in any numbers, our besiegers might easily outnumber us two to one. Besides, they would be seasoned fighters, familiar with the ground, knowing all the tricks of night raiding. To be sure a delay until daylight might greatly increase the number of the enemy, as the scattered irregulars were drawn in, yet my own men would work with greater confidence when they could see the force opposing them. Besides, we were well protected here, with sufficient ammuition for a stubborn defence, and doubtless food enough in the house to sustain us for a day or two.

If Dunn was in command without I did not anticipate anything in the nature of a reckless attack. Nothing I had yet seen of Calvert Dunn had impressed me with either his courage or his capacity; and the almost total cessation of firing told of weakness either in numbers or command. It seemed to me an energetic leadership would have stormed the house before we could have arranged for its defence. I drew my breath quickly, suddenly possessed by a new fear. What about Big Donald? What about the secret passage? If he had escaped, got safe away, it would put a new face on everything. There would be no question as to the fierceness of the fighting if he commanded yonder. He was a different stamp of man from the Staff Lieutenant. What would he do first? Try a flank movement, endeavoring to take us in the rear, by means of the secret passage? The silence without, the sudden cessation of open attack in front, immediately became ominous, as this thought occurred to me. Here was the real danger, the important point for defence. But where could I seek? My only scrap of knowledge was that Donald had entered by way of the second story, and he had departed up the stairs. The entrance, then, must be above. There was a light still burning at the head of the circular staircase, but I could distinguish no sound, no indication of movement. Yet a moment of delay might cost us dear.

"O'Brien!"

He was wrapping a strip of cloth tightly about a wounded arm, but he stopped, glancing back at me across his shoulder.

"Yis, sor."

"Who did you leave in command in the parlor?"

"A young fellow be the name of Summers, sor; he seemed to loike foightin'."

"Well, let Masterson finish that nursing job, and come with me. Bring your gun along."

We mounted to the top of the staircase, seeing and hearing nothing. Both back and front of the upper hallway were in shadow, and I paused a moment while briefly explaining to my companion the nature of our errand. His keen eyes peered back and forth as he listened.

"It 's most loikely to be connected with the foireplace yonder, sor," he volunteered, pointing straight ahead.

"So it seems to me," I admitted, "but we shall have to go over every inch of this floor to be certain. You go back there and stand guard while I rummage through the rooms."

It was not a pleasant task, the doors all being tightly closed, and the rooms in darkness. Besides, the two young women were probably in hiding there somewhere, unless Miss Jean had accompanied Donald and escaped from the house. Yet I hardly thought that probable, for the latter had ample time to enter the passage before the girl had left me in the lower hall. However, the thought of her caused me to rap at each door before venturing to open it, although such warning added to my own peril if any armed enemy was lurking within. And as to that I could not know. Donald might still be in the house, yet I had less fear of his resistance than of sudden, murderous attack by the mysterious assassin who

had already taken two lives and escaped unseen. Yet, revolver in hand, determined to search every nook and corner, I began with the front chambers, sounding their walls, testing their floors, and feeling my way about until convinced I had left no inch unexplored. Miss Dunn was in the third room visited, calling out in hysterical voice to my rap, begging to know what I wanted, yet urging me to leave her alone. She was so thoroughly frightened that, after finding her door locked, I endeavored to reassure her through the keyhole, but heard nothing in return but the girl's sobs. Satisfied that she was alone, I left her to her misery.

I searched two other rooms, including the one wherein I had found Navarre's body. This I knew was Jean's chamber, yet I was in no way surprised at not discovering her there, as the memory of the murder would be sufficient to keep her from venturing within. Yet everything I touched reminded me of her, especially the various accessories to a lady's toilet on the dressing table, and the numerous garments hanging in the closet. However, I found nothing disturbed, and no evidence that any one had been there since the removal of the Lieutenant's body. My heart was beating rapidly as I came forth once more into the hall, and tried the door of the apartment opposite. It was locked, and I rapped softly. There was a rustle within, and Jean's voice:

"Who is it?"

"Lieutenant King. Will you speak with me a moment?"

I heard the lock turn, the door open creakingly, and

she stood before me, her face calm, but her eyes troubled. Scarcely knowing what to say, I hesitated, and she broke out with a swift question:

"What is it? What has happened? You have been fighting below?"

"Yes, Miss Denslow, but nothing which need alarm you. Affairs have changed very rapidly, but you can remain here in perfect safety. The Federal troop of cavalry which came to my assistance were suddenly fired on by parties concealed in the shrubbery. We lost a number of men, but the survivors succeeded in getting into the house, and have driven their assailants back. Just now it is quiet on both sides, but the truce is probably not lasting."

"What soldiers came to aid you?"

"A troop of Ohio Cavalry, under guidance of one of my scouts."

"Not — not Bill Daniels?" Her eyes were dark with horror, and for the first time I realized that she shared with me the belief that this man was responsible for the many horrors of the night.

"No, he was not with them," I assured her, clasping her hand in sudden desire to give comfort. "He is now in the Federal lines, and has not been here at all. Whoever the murderer may be, he is not Daniels."

"Are you sure?"

"Absolutely so; my other scout, O'Brien, who is on guard yonder, asserts that Daniels was never out of his sight until after they returned to camp. He is a simple-hearted Irish lad, and, I believe, speaks the truth."

She looked from my face down in the hall to where the lad was barely visible amid the far shadows, her hand still within mine, as if she clung to me unconsciously. Then her eyes came back questioningly to my own.

"What — what is he doing there?"

"Merely watching the hall while I search the rooms."

I could see the doubt in the blue-gray depths of her eyes, while her hand dropped from mine, and the lines of her mouth hardened.

"Search the rooms? Why should you search the rooms?"

"Because we cannot afford to be taken by surprise from the rear. I am hunting for the secret passage."

"Is — is that why you stationed him way back there?"

The question was innocent enough, natural enough, yet it instantly awoke my suspicion. She knew now where that entrance was. She may not have known before, but now she did. Donald must have still been in the hall when she came up stairs, and he had been compelled to reveal to her his means of escape from the house. And we must have guessed right, for it was O'Brien's position which alarmed her. Perhaps I could surprise the girl into a partial confession.

"I stationed him there," I said quietly, "because I believe that fireplace hides the secret. And now we are going to find out."

An instant I thought the shot had carried home, but only an instant. Then her eyes smiled, almost mockingly.

"That is very bright of you, I am sure, but really I think you are mistaken. Have you searched all the rooms?"

"All except those to the rear."

"I have never looked into those myself," she confessed. "May I go with you? Truly, I am as anxious to uncover this mysterious passage as you are."

She laid her hand upon my sleeve, yet I clung to my first suspicion, determined now to be satisfied with nothing less than a thorough examination of the fireplace.

"Certainly, you may go with me," I answered carelessly. "But the rooms can wait; that big chimney looks to me the more promising."

Convinced by the expression on her face, not only that she knew the truth but that I was upon the right trail, I started toward the rear of the hall, never glancing behind, yet aware that Miss Jean was following. In appearance it was a strange, old-fashioned fireplace, nothing more; large enough to contain a great back log, and overshadowed by a huge mantel. The opening was concealed by an iron fire-screen, leaving nothing visible to arouse suspicion, yet the apparent size of the chimney, and that such a fireplace should be located here upon the second floor, appeared sufficiently odd to merit close attention.

"Have you heard or seen anything, O'Brien?" I asked, as I came up.

"Not a thing, sor," his eyes on the girl, "only the wind. There 's a powerful dhraft blowin' up the chimney."

"No doubt; it is large enough to contain a hurricane. Lay hold of the screen, and let us see what it looks like inside."

He leaned his carbine against the wall, and grasped what appeared to be the handle of the iron sheet. It failed to yield to his effort, and I laid hold with him, thinking it was probably caught in some manner. We tugged together, but the thing was immovable. Surprised, I bent forward, striving in the dim light to discover the cause, and running my hand along the edge. Instantly I comprehended; the screen was bolted fast. I stepped back, convinced we had at last uncovered the secret, and turned my face toward Miss Denslow. She stood motionless covering us both with O'Brien's levelled carbine.

CHAPTER XIX

A REBEL STILL

THE girl's eyes looked almost black over the shining barrel, her lips compressed and resolute. I could see the uplifted hammer, the finger upon the trigger, and realized that the mountain spirit, now thoroughly aroused, made her truly dangerous. And she had determined upon her course.

"Don't move, either of you, except to my orders," her voice sounding hard and metallic, as we stared at her in our first surprise. "O'Brien, reach back and open that door at your left; no, don't move your body; you can reach it with your hand."

He did so, his motion that of an automaton, his eyes fastened on the black muzzle of the gun. Dazed, stupefied, angry as I was, I could not deny the admiration I felt for her cool action. The polished barrel of the carbine never trembled, the watchful eyes never left us, the girl face was white but determined.

"Now move backward into that room, both of you. Lieutenant King, if you drop your hand to your belt I shall have to fire."

I did not believe she would; I could not think it in her nature to do so; besides, the alarm of the discharge would defeat her plans. Yet I durst not risk the experiment;

durst not venture a movement which would tempt her to carry out her threat.

"Miss Denslow," I protested helplessly, "I have tried to serve you, have trusted you — is this the act of a friend?"

"No," she answered sharply, "this is war. There is nothing between us — nothing which can change my purpose. As God is my witness, if you do not go, I fire."

It was useless to argue, dangerous to delay. The desperation of the girl was evident enough, and, in her present mood, she would probably hesitate at nothing. Step by step we drew back across the threshold, the black muzzle following us steadily, the girl's eye sighting along the barrel, her every nerve apparently strained to the utmost, yet steady with resolve. An instant we remained thus, neither O'Brien nor I daring to change our posture, then, holding the deadly gun still posed, she swung shut the door with her foot, and the lock clicked, leaving us in total darkness.

"The infernal little divil!" he burst forth, finding his tongue in a sudden rush of passion. "The purring cat! Damn me, but I'd loike to git me hands on her for a minute."

"You might as well stop that, O'Brien," I interrupted sternly. "The girl did nothing but her duty. We were fools to give her the chance, and I especially, for I tested her mettle before. The thing for us now is to find some way out, before Donald leads the way in and takes our men in the rear. Feel around, and find out what this room is like."

Even in the darkness the nature of the apartment was easily discoverable by sense of touch. It was small, apparently the sleeping-quarters of some servant, containing a cot bed, a small table, with only a pincushion on it, a washstand, and two ordinary chairs. From feeling I judged the carpet on the floor to be a rag one, while a heavy curtain, drawn down, concealed the single window. The walls were solid and unbroken, two pictures and a small mirror being their only ornaments. The door was immovable, and of hardwood, against which a knife blade made little impression. As I investigated these details, groping about in the darkness, my mind was busy analyzing the situation. For the third time since entering this house I found myself a prisoner, twice through the wit and nerve of this woman. And she, unknowing it, was my wife. Could there be a stranger position possible; would fiction ever dare to invent so odd, so seemingly impossible a situation? I could scarcely believe it myself, yet might not divorce my mind from her, every nerve a-tingle with the memory of how attractive she appeared even as she stood there holding us helpless under her aim. What a magnificent creature she was, womanly even in that moment of trial, devoted, loyal, ready to sacrifice herself for her cause! Here was surely a heart to love and trust. I made no attempt to deceive myself. Except for those legal bonds, by which we were fraudulently bound together, I was nothing to her —not even a friend. She had been kind, it was true, and had expressed her confidence in me, but her heart had been given elsewhere. For the sake of her lover, as well as

her cause, she was willing to sacrifice me, if necessary. This knowledge brought me to myself with a shock. I might love her, as I already confessed I did, yet so hopeless a love should not be permitted to interfere between me and my present duty to imperilled comrades. I could not spare her any more than she had spared me. This was war, not love, and she had chosen the course for herself. I would drive from me all thought except the duty to my flag. I would forget everything but that I was a soldier.

I held aside the heavy curtain, and endeavored to peer forth through the glass. I could see nothing but a thin waving of branches, and an occasional spark of flame to the left as if our assailants were still firing at the front of the house, to distract attention no doubt from their more important operations at the rear. After some fumbling I discovered the lock of the window, and succeeded in silently raising the sash, so as to lean through the opening with head and shoulders. Yet the reward was scarcely worth the effort; the darkness was intense, and the silence profound. The ground must have been at least thirty feet below, and a great tree stood in front, shadowing everything, its spreading branches obscuring the view. O'Brien thrust his head out beside mine, peering about as with the eyes of a cat.

"It is black as the bottomless pit to me," I whispered; "can you see anything?"

He took his time answering, staring out through the blackness, with one hand shading his eyes.

"There 's a grape arbor, or something loike that,

sthraight ahead, sor," he said at last slowly, "an' maybe there 's plenty of Rebs hoidin' in it; but there 's no signs of thim from here. They're keepin' up some shootin' out in front, an' I thought quite a squad just wint across that open space yonder toward the nigger cabins. They was all bunched together, but there was some movement there to the roight."

"If there were any guards in the grape arbor they would have heard us lift the window," I returned decisively, "and taken a shot this way. Draw in your head until I see if it is possible to reach the roof from here."

"Why not thry a dhrop to the ground, sor?"

"Because after we got there we would be no better off. Those fellows are preparing to come up through that back passage, and our work is to head them off. Help me to lower this upper sash."

I climbed up, pushing my body out as far as possible, while O'Brien steadied me by grasping my feet. My hands groped about for the edge of the roof, and my fingers found firm hold upon the lead gutter. My recollection of the roof was that it had a rather sharp pitch, sufficiently so to make scaling it, even if I could draw my body up, an impossibility. But this gutter was built in solid, and would safely sustain my weight. I swung out, testing it cautiously, expecting every instant to be fired at from below. Nothing happened, however, and I determined to risk the venture.

"Let loose of my feet, O'Brien; I am going to try for the next room."

He was too surprised for protest, but released his grip,

and I swung free, dangling from the gutter. I heard him clamber up on the sill, and saw his head poked out through the opening.

"Stay where you are," I ordered softly, "and if I make it I'll let you out through the door. Be careful; some fellow may take a shot this way."

It was not a particularly difficult enterprise; a bit of a strain on the arms and fingers, of course, yet, under ordinary conditions, I would have thought little of the danger. My principal worry was that of discovery from below. The distance did not exceed ten feet, and I moved along hand over hand, noiselessly, the supporting gutter not yielding in the slightest to my weight, and my mind becoming more confident as I advanced. I could see little, but my dangling feet told me when I hung opposite the first window. Here a serious difficulty presented itself — the window was closed, probably locked. Yet I had anticipated this, reasoning that the clasp would be the same as that of the room in which we had been imprisoned, a half-circle catch between the two sashes. To reach it with my foot I would have to break a pane of glass, and it must be the right pane. I felt for it carefully, becoming more and more keenly aware of the strain on arms and fingers, located the proper spot, and sent my shoe crashing through the glass. A musket boomed from the black shadow of the grape arbor, the leaden messenger chugging into the wood just above my head; two carbines barked from a window of the lower floor, their flame showing like a red gash in the night. I stuck my leg through the shattered pane, felt the clasp with my

shoe, and pressed it back. An instant later, with foot and hand, I had forced down the sash, and swung my body in through the opening. It was a ticklish job to let go my grip on the gutter, but my left hand found purchase on the frame of the window, and I squirmed in, inch by inch, expecting every instant a second shot from the fellow in the arbor. As I finally dropped to the floor his musket exploded, the bullet singing through the open window, burying itself in the ceiling, and showering me with plaster. The sharp responsive crack of carbines proved the troopers below alert, while a yell of surprise and pain made me hopeful that one of their shots had reached the mark.

The noise of crashing glass, and my fall to the floor, would hardly alarm the girl, even if she remained on guard in the hall, as there had been so much of similar disturbance during the past half-hour. If the door of this room was unlocked, and I could surprise her, the rest would be easily accomplished. I crossed the room softly, tried the knob, which instantly yielded, and, opening the door a scant inch, peered anxiously forth. Looking first toward the fireplace I saw nothing, and it was a moment or two before I perceived her, sitting on a low stool, the cocked carbine across her knees, at the head of the stairs. Instantly I comprehended her purpose. Confident that O'Brien and I were securely caged, and that Donald would lead his men into the house by way of the secret passage, she was waiting to defend the stairs, to prevent any search of the second story. Her back was toward me, and to creep upon her across that soft carpet would not be a

difficult venture; yet, for the moment I hesitated, dreading the necessity, and feeling the love for her well up into my heart.

She was sufficiently in earnest, no doubt; indeed the intenseness of her attitude, the grip of her fingers on the weapon, her very posture, exhibited determination. And yet the woman in her was equally apparent; the quick trembling of her shoulders, the occasional uplifting of one hand as if she swept aside gathering tears. I could perceive one white cheek, and the fluffy brown of her hair, although the light was so dim that she seemed little more than shadow. In that moment of indecision I would have given the world to go to her, to clasp her in my arms, and stand beside her through right or wrong. War, duty, difference of political opinion, appeared nothing beside the appeal of that pathetic figure guarding the stairs. And yet, if I knew her nature at all, she would despise me if I failed to do my best for the cause in which I was enlisted. Weakness, surrender, would never win her. Womanly though she was, she came of fighting blood, and the man she trusted would have to prove himself. She could respect and admire a worthy enemy, but she would despise a weakling, even if his lack of manhood came through love of her. Besides, she was doing this for Donald, and the mere remembrance stiffened me instantly. She would not find me as easy as she thought; they should never get together and laugh over my discomfiture, or make light of me as a soldier. She had said this was war, and I would bear my part in it.

The door opened noiselessly, and I crept out, my eyes

never leaving her motionless figure. Apparently there was some movement down stairs, for she kept looking intently that way, utterly oblivious to any danger from behind. I was within a foot of her before some instinct told her of my presence. Even as she leaped to her feet, giving vent to a faint cry of startled fear, I had grasped the barrel of her gun, and held it safely.

"You said, Miss Denslow, this was war," I began sternly, "and now it is my turn. Give me the carbine." She released her grasp of it, her eyes on my face. They were not angry, but soft from unshed tears. Some way the expression in them took all the fight out of me.

"I — I am sorry," I stammered lamely, "that I must hold you prisoner, but you have proven too dangerous to be permitted to go free."

"How did you get here? Where did you come from?" she questioned, finding her voice.

"Oh, that was simple enough. I came out through the window of one room, and in through the window of another. Some of your friends shot at me, but their marksmanship was poor. You must have a pretty low opinion of Yankees to suppose one would lie idle under lock and key."

She sank back upon the chair, her face buried in her hands. A wave of pity swept over me.

"Don't be angry," I urged, thinking only of her. "I could do no less."

"I am not angry at you," and she looked up at me, the tears now plainly visible, "I respect you more because you have not yielded. But — but I have failed — failed

utterly. I am angry with myself, humiliated, miserable."

"Yes, I can understand that. I felt much the same when the lock clicked behind me. But all this is the fortune of war, and it may be your turn to rejoice in another hour." There was a noise behind, and I wheeled about quickly, throwing up the carbine. O'Brien stood in the open doorway through which I had come, staring at us.

"I got toired waitin', sor," he said, grinning, "so I thried me luck at the gutter route."

"Very good," I returned, driven by his presence to action. "And now, Miss Denslow, I shall be compelled to lock you up for a while."

She rose to her feet, no longer looking at me.

"Where?"

"The room you were in when I first came upstairs."

She followed me, without word of protest, her head bent forward. I held open the door, glancing within to see the nature of the apartment. Then her eyes uplifted and met mine, and I raised my cap.

"Believe me, I regret this."

"There is no necessity for apology. You merely do your duty," she returned quietly, "I am a Rebel still."

I closed and locked the door.

CHAPTER XX

WE FIND THE PASSAGE

I MOVED back down the hall, retaining within my hands the carbine wrenched from her grasp. It was not easy to lock her in as a prisoner, to treat her as a dangerous enemy, and yet there was no other way. From all appearances the cavalrymen below were fully capable of defending the house from any open attack; while, judging from all I could see and hear, the besieging party did not greatly outnumber our own, although their numbers were increasing, as Colonel Donald's irregulars gathered in about us like hawks to their prey. But the real danger existed in a secret attack from the rear, and I alone suspected this possibility. Our safety lay in discovery of the hidden entrance and our preparation to defend it. More than this, the grim secret of the murder appeared to centre there also. I could not divorce from my thought the conviction that along that passage would be found evidence that I was innocent of the crimes of the past night. And Jean Denslow had attempted to prevent investigation, not from any desire to injure me, but to help Donald, and to aid the Confederacy. There was nothing for it but to treat her as an enemy, unpleasant though I found the task.

What surprised me was the slowness with which those

without availed themselves of this advantageous point of attack. Both their officers knew the secret way leading into the house; and, while Dunn's caution, or cowardice, whichever it was, might restrain him from so bold an effort, yet Donald must have long since reached their lines, and action was the dominating trait of his character. What could they be waiting for — the arrival of more men, or the coming of daylight when they could observe better the nature of their work? Both, perhaps. O'Brien had reported a grouping of men toward the rear of the building. No doubt they were being advanced into the passageway, but might be held there until daybreak before pressing the assault home. This would give them ample time to gather in their scattered bands, enabling them to advance on the house from both front and rear in sufficient force to make victory assured. It was their supreme confidence in the final result which kept them idle, firing merely enough to let us know they remained watchful, and using the cloak of darkness as cover to their movements. Our only hope lay in discovery of their means of entrance; this once found and securely guarded, we could surprise them in turn, and defend our position indefinitely. So assured was I as to this, that my entire thought focussed upon the one point, the immediate importance of uncovering this hidden way eclipsing even the memory of the girl I had just left a prisoner in the room behind. The fireplace was where all my suspicions centred, and I turned toward it, grasping the Irish lad by the sleeve of his jacket, and facing him in the same direction.

"What is it, sor?" he asked, surprised and staring.

Before I could answer, the huge, overhanging mantel seemed slowly, silently to swing outward as if hung on a central pivot. We both saw it plainly enough, although, for the moment, we were motionless from surprise, O'Brien leaning forward, I with hand still grasping his arm as in a vise. There was the yawning of a narrow black hole, the rays of light barely revealing, as if it were a shadow, a white haggard face, the unmistakable features of a woman. Her eyes, blazing oddly, seemed to glare into ours, like those of a wild animal. Then it was all over, the mantel had swung back into position, and we beheld nothing but the solid wall. It was a weird, uncanny thing, the memory of it like a delirium of fever. O'Brien gripped the rail of the baluster, his face fairly gray from terror.

"By God! did you see that, sor?" he choked out, his voice barely audible.

"Yes," nervously wetting my own lips, yet convinced this was no supernatural visitor. "It was a woman's face."

"You mane it was rale — rale, wid flesh an' blood behoind it?"

"Sure, O'Brien," and I shook him fiercely. "As real as you or I. Brace up, man! It is not ghosts we're fighting, awful as the face looked. It was a woman, looking out at us through some opening in that fireplace."

His clutching fingers relaxed, and he straightened up, still staring, as if only half convinced.

"God grant you're right, sor," he muttered solemnly,

"but niver did I see such a face before on a human. Sure, it 's no woman I iver want to know."

"And it 's one I should like to be better acquainted with. At least the sight has established one fact — the fireplace there is the entrance to the secret passage. Here, take the carbine, and stand by while I try to discover how it works."

He advanced with me reluctantly enough, although the familiar touch of the weapon gave him a measure of confidence. Yet he stopped, as if rooted to the spot, ten feet away, and, I doubted not, would have run at the slightest alarm. I had not as yet attained full control over my own nerves, the recollection of that ghastly face haunting me strangely; yet I compelled myself to advance, convinced the vision had been no illusion, but an earthly reality to be met with boldness. Here was the spot I sought, here the revealment of the mystery, here the point of attack. Whatever of horror might lie hidden in the blackness beyond that fireplace, it must be explored and uncovered. With every nerve tingling I bent to the task, cursing the cowardice which made my hands tremble, my blood like ice. Apparently the entire lower half of the mantel had revolved as if on a central pivot, and I felt carefully for the slightest crevice indicating the place of separation. To sight and touch there was none; not even after I had called O'Brien to bring the lamp, and we had together gone over the entire surface inch by inch. Nowhere was there an opening sufficient even for the insertion of a knife blade; apparently the mantel was as solid and immovable as the closely fitted stones of

the chimney. I stepped back, staring in bewilderment, begining to doubt the evidence of my own sight. O'Brien still held the lamp in unsteady hands, the flame full on his face, and flickering along the wall in grotesque shadows.

"I tould ye, sor," he burst out wildly, "that was no human. 'T was the Divil's own face that I saw, an' niver a doubt of it. Saint Mary! but it manes the death of the wan or the both of us."

I set my teeth grimly, his fear the very cordial I needed, my anger yielding me new resolve. There was no superstition in my blood, and I realized I faced nothing but human inventiveness and human malice. There was certainly a way leading into that chimney, and I intended to find it, even though I tore the thing apart stone by stone. Not alone our defence of the house was involved in this search, but the solution of the crimes of which I stood accused gave me fresh incentive. That awful face, woman's though it was, was demoniacal enough to cause me to connect it instantly with these deeds of blood feud. Whatever the cause or purpose; whatever of hellish suffering lay behind, that dreadful apparition pictured the very spirit of murder — murder in the dark.

"Perhaps it does, my lad," I answered, my hand on his shoulder, "but when that death comes it will find us plucking the heart out of this mystery. Now come to your senses and listen to me. Two murders have been committed in this house within the last forty-eight hours, and whoever committed them has left no trace. There is a secret passageway leading in here with an opening

on this floor. We have got to find it for two reasons — to keep the Rebs out, and to solve the mystery of these murders. You and I both saw that mantel move until it revealed an opening. It was done by human hands, and the face which glared out at us was a human face. It was devilish enough, I admit, but with flesh and blood behind it. Now shake yourself together and stand by, for I am going to find a way in, and you are going along with me."

He did not appear a very promising subject, and I half expected to see him break for the stairs. Under other circumstances I would have laughed at the expression of his face, but then I was not myself wholly free from the spell of those eyes which had glared forth at us from the wall, and I could appreciate the lad's honest terror. Action alone would supply the remedy, and I must drive him to it remorselessly, commanding and domineering, until his natural courage responded.

"Come on, lad," I insisted. "Place the lamp on the chair, so you can keep the gun in your hands while I feel over every inch of this contrivance. There is a spring-lock here somewhere."

There was no doubt he would keep a thorough watch, his eyes roving backward to the dark end of the hall, the rays of light revealing each nook and corner of the mysterious fireplace. I heard him cock the carbine, the sharp click plainly audible in the silence, and was pleased to note the thin line of his compressed lips.

"Av yer sure it was human, sor," he said, wiping the perspiration from his forehead with one hand, "then

I'm damned av I'm afraid of it, at all, at all. But niver did I see sich a face before."

"They were insane eyes, that was all, O'Brien. At first I almost thought as you did, but now my senses have come back, and I am for probing this thing to the bottom. Now stand ready."

I went over the entire surface with my fingers, pressing against every protuberance which might conceal the spring controlling the mechanism. The mantel fitted back into the chimney so perfectly I found no spot where even the thin blade of my knife could find entrance; the stones were solidly mortared, and the iron fire-screen was bolted down securely in place. A brass rail extended out a foot or so, and ran across the front, and two iron andirons were let in through a slight cutting of the screen. I moved one of these, finding it loose, and then placed my hand upon the other, simply because I knew not what else to do. To my surprise it was immovable, seemingly as solid as the stones beneath. I endeavored to pull it forth but without result.

"Here 's a queer thing, O'Brien," I exclaimed, "That other andiron is loose but this one is fastened solidly."

He leaned over, and stared at it, his gun ready under one arm.

"Thry pullin' up on it, sor," he suggested. "Maybe it 's just caught on something."

I got up from my knees, and bent down, both hands gripping the iron. As I straightened my arms, without the slightest resistance, or noise, the bar uplifted a bare inch, and then caught again with a dull metallic click.

There was a low whir as of some hidden machinery, and I stepped instantly back, gripping the revolver at my belt, uncertain for the instant whether my pull had operated the strange contrivance, or whether some happening was responsible. Slowly, utterly silent but for that soft whirring, the mantel swung as on a central pivot, half-way round, and then stopped with a click, leaving before us a black opening, large enough to admit easily the passage of a man's body, and about four feet high. I seemed to see this, and O'Brien's face at the same instant. The latter was absolutely gray, and his limbs shook under him. What power held him from flight, or kept him from discharging his gun into the orifice, I could not determine, yet his very terror gave me relief.

"Uncock your carbine," I ordered. "There is nothing there to shoot at. See," and I caught up the lamp and held it where the light streamed through the opening. He obeyed mechanically, as he would in battle, but still shrinking back, the muzzle of his weapon pointing into the depths of the hole. I stepped in front of him, advancing the lamp, so as to yield me a clearer view. It was simply the interior of a huge chimney, built of stones, carefully mortared, and so clean as to be proof positive no smoke had ever passed that way. The opening downward was square, three feet across I judged, but, as I held the lamp lower, the passage appeared to widen out considerably below the floor level, and I caught glimpse of a ladder, with wide steps, tilted to such an angle as to make climbing scarcely more difficult than would a pair of stairs. In a niche of the wall, on a wooden shelf, was

a lantern, and a metallic box of matches. I handed O'Brien the lamp, bidding him place it on the chair, and then, carefully avoiding all contact with the andiron which apparently operated the machinery, stepped inside the opening, upon the narrow stone rim encircling the shaft. My extended hand touched the roof, seemingly proving that the form of a chimney above was a mere sham, intended to bear out the deception of the fireplace; yet several iron bars, conveniently located for steps, were bolted to the side wall, making me suspicious that the space above might be utilized as a small room. I shook the lantern, found it half filled with oil, and applied a match to the wick. The yellow flame gave a good view of the narrow quarters, but, although I held it above my head, scanning the closely matched boards of the ceiling, I could discover no signs of a trap door. There was sufficient dust collected on the iron bars to convince me no one had lately climbed them, and I determined to explore below.

"You see what this is, O'Brien, a secret passage," I said, glancing back at him. "That is human enough; the Devil don't need such things to help him get about. Whomsoever we saw peering out of here came up these steps, and, whether it was woman or man, we can travel the same route. I'm going down, and I want you to follow me, but don't touch that andiron as you come in."

He moved briskly enough, evidently convinced at last that merely flesh and blood fronted us, and ashamed of his first terror. His was naturally the reckless courage

of a boy, and his cheeks flushed with excitement, his eyes peering into the black hole.

"'T is an aisy place to shoot from, sor," he volunteered, "av any wan was hidin' down below."

"You are right about that; give me the sling-strap from your carbine."

Unbuckled, it was long enough to extend half the length of the ladder, and I dangled the lantern down the well, leaning forward and peering anxiously at what the yellow glare revealed. I could see to the bottom, but the shadows there might have concealed a dozen men. Evidently the shaft did not go to the basement, and there was a black opening at the ladder's foot, which would likely prove the entrance to a tunnel. Any further delay was useless, and I drew up the lantern, handed the sling-strap back to the lad, and tested the ladder rungs with my weight. They were sufficiently solid, and I went down swiftly, half anticipating a shot from out the darkness beneath, dangling the lantern, the yellow flicker of flame merely accentuating the deep shadows.

CHAPTER XXI

WE FIND COLONEL DONALD

I WAS at the bottom, finding myself in a small, rock-walled room some six feet square, a tunnel leading off from it of barely sufficient height to permit me to enter its mouth without stooping, before O'Brien ventured upon the ladder. Feeling to the full the weird grimness of the place, my mind yet haunted by the memory of that ghastly face, I waited until he joined me, holding up the lantern so he might easily see the steps of the ladder, yet never once removing my eyes from the impenetrable darkness ahead. I hardly knew what to expect, what danger to guard against. I not only felt a strange horror at suddenly confronting that mysterious woman, but I expected every instant to hear the noise of advancing men. We could make a fair defence in that narrow space, it was true, yet even here, and amid darkness, numbers would possess an advantage, while any attempt at retreat up that ladder would mean almost certain death. Seemingly boldness was the only alternative. There might be some way of blocking this passage, and thus protecting our rear. By the time O'Brien reached me I had determined on exploring the tunnel to its end.

"How are you, lad?" I questioned, endeavoring to put

courage in my voice. "Have you got your nerve back, so as to go with me into that hole?"

He fumbled the lock of his gun, gazing doubtfully about, and down the tunnel where the rays of light penetrated a dozen feet; his teeth were set, his square jaw advanced.

"I'll go where ye ordher me, sor, but I niver hed a damneder job since I first wint sojerin'."

"All right, then; there 's room for the two of us shoulder to shoulder. No matter what happens, don't fire until I give the word, and don't let shadows frighten you."

I held the lantern in my left hand, throwing the rays of light as far in advance as possible. With the other I drew a revolver from my belt, holding it cocked and ready. It was a perfectly straight passage, walls and roof of stone, smoothly matched, evidently thus arranged so any one could pass that way in the dark with no danger of injury. The floor was earth, but levelled as if by a transit, sufficiently hard to leave no impression of feet passing over it. It seemed to me the tunnel must run directly beneath the ell kitchen, and I doubted if the roof was two feet below the surface of the ground. This directness gave us confidence, as it permitted the rays of the lantern to penetrate a considerable distance, and, although alert and watchful, my thought drifted to the girl I had left locked in the room above. I wondered if it was possible for her to escape, to sound an alarm without, or even to close the opening fireplace, and thus securely trap us in this black hole underground. I felt

no doubt as to her doing so if opportunity came, and she was not one to yield weakly and make no effort. I began questioning my judgment in not leaving O'Brien on guard in the hall, or, at least ordering one of the troopers below to the second floor during our exploration. I came to a halt, this new conception of danger in full possession of my mind, purposing to despatch him back, and go on alone, when the fellow suddenly gripped my arm, advancing the black barrel of his carbine until it pointed straight down the tunnel.

"Be all the saints, sor," he whispered hoarsely, "ain't that the body of a man?"

It assuredly was, or else my eyes deceived me. It was lying head toward us against the side wall, with limbs extended half across the passage. The face was turned away, a wide-brimmed soft hat, still on the head, helping to render the entire shadow shapeless. The light barely revealed the outlines, yet, as I held the lantern higher, there could be no doubt as to its being the figure of a human being. Neither of us spoke, but I could feel the grip of the boy's fingers, and hear his quick breathing. It was an uncanny thing to meet with in that place, and my own heart throbbed, every thought of the possible peril above banished as I fronted this new discovery. Who could it be? How came the body there? Two hours before, Donald had passed through this tunnel on his way into the house, and had found the path unobstructed. An hour later he had gone out again. The first trip had been made without a light, and yet he never could have passed that body without touching it. Could

it be the wearer of that awful face? I was convinced the latter was a woman, while the body yonder was unquestionably that of a man. Yet the impression of that countenance haunted me, seemed forever associated with the horror of this hole in which we skulked, and I dragged O'Brien forward, dreading lest I had to gaze upon it again. She might have been attired in men's clothes; and it seemed to me then, I would rather look on any other human countenance, death-stamped, than on her wildly distorted visage. I cannot convey in words the intense horror with which I recalled the ghastly outline of that face; the very recurring memory left me nerveless, and I comprehended why the lad held back, half struggling to break away.

Yet I dragged him forward with me, until the light fell full upon the huddled-up bunch of humanity, until I thrust the lantern down close against the wall, and got a glimpse beneath the hat brim. Already from the massive figure I suspected the truth; now my eyes confirmed it — the man lying there was Colonel Donald. I saw the wound in his throat, the blood-stains on the stones. He had been murdered, stricken exactly as those others, pounced upon in the dark without the slightest warning, the deadly knife driven home by a cunning hand. It seemed to me I would choke from the very horror of it; my hand tore open the collar of my shirt; my eyes stared down at his white face, and then nervously about into the black shadows.

O'Brien was the first to recover himself, for he had experienced less of the night's mystery, and the inert body

lying before us was to him merely that of a strange man. He dropped upon his knees, turned the ghastly face up to the light, and pressed his ear against the gray jacket.

"He 's not clane dead, yit, sor," he declared, "there 's a bate to his heart."

The unexpected words brought me instantly to myself, and I caught up the limp hand, feeling eagerly for the pulse. It was throbbing weakly, and the very touch of it afforded me hope. I liked this Donald; whatever he might be to Jean Denslow he had won my respect, and I would save his life if possible — save it even though he stood between me and the one woman. I tore the neckerchief from about my throat.

"Have you water in your canteen, O'Brien? Here, hand it over."

I bathed the white face in it, washing away the blood upon his throat, thus disclosing the nature of the wound. It was not deep, not even dangerous; evidently the knife had slipped, inflicting a jagged scratch, yet missing the vital point aimed at. O'Brien lifted the head on his arm, his hand pressing back the thick hair, streaked with gray.

"He 's got a humpin' crack here, sor," he said, "an' it 's bled a lot. That 's loikely what laid him out rather then the pin-prick ye're clanin'."

I took a glance at it, touching the congealed blood and matted hair with my fingers.

"Yes," I decided, "he was struck in the dark suddenly, and the force of the blow, or else the impact of some body, knocked him backward. His head hit the stone, rendering him unconscious, and the party attacking,

supposing his knife thrust had reached a vital part, believed the man had fallen dead, as he probably never moved. That water is reviving him."

I had a small flask of brandy in the pocket of my jacket, a swallow or two remaining. This I succeeded in forcing between Donald's teeth, and he gulped it down unconsciously, O'Brien bracing his head up with supporting shoulder. The fiery stuff had immediate effect; the man's eyes opened, his great chest heaved in an effort to breathe. He stared into our faces apparently without comprehending; the blue uniforms alone riveting his attention.

"Yankees?" the single word came with a sob.

"Yes, Colonel Donald," I explained hastily, "but we are here to help you. You remember me, do you not — Lieutenant King?"

A moment he appeared to hesitate, as if the recollection were not entirely clear; then his expression became more natural, and he made a weak effort to smile.

"King? King? Oh, certainly, I remember now; your men came, and I —" He stopped, evidently struggling to recall what had occurred to him after the arrival of the troopers. I thought perhaps a word of explanation might assist in clearing his brain.

"It was a troop of Federal cavalry despatched to my aid, Colonel Donald. I sent Miss Denslow up the stairs, intending you should thus have an opportunity for escape, and was still parleying with the fellows on the front porch, when a squad of concealed Confederates poured a volley into us. They hit a few, but the remainder made the

house, and drove the others back when they attempted to rush us. We've been defending the house ever since, and I made a search for this secret passage. I found my way into it at last, and discovered you lying here apparently dead, with a wound in your throat just as those others had."

He put his hand up to the gash, as if just made aware of its existence.

"I am afraid I cannot help you very much, Lieutenant," he said slowly, evidently striving to remember. "I left you with Jean, intending to search this tunnel. I had opened the fireplace, and was lighting the lantern when your men came, and I stole back as far as the head of the stairs to learn what was happening. Then Jean came up with your message, and I decided to escape to my own men as quickly as possible. Having no longer any thought of search, and knowing the way perfectly, I blew out the lantern, and came down the ladder in the dark. I have made the trip in that manner a dozen times, and felt no fear. I must have advanced through the tunnel for a hundred feet or more, one hand touching the wall to keep the direction, when something struck me so unexpectedly, that I reeled backward and fell. I have no recollection of seeing anything; only of feeling the blow, and realizing I was falling. The next I remember is looking up into your faces, wondering where I was."

The man was far too weak and dazed to be questioned at any length; in his present state it would be useless to describe the woman's face we had seen, or Miss Jean's effort to hold us prisoners. The discovery of him lying

there unconscious had, at least, served to clarify the situation somewhat. Here was an explanation of why no attack had thus far been made upon us from the rear: either no one outside knew of this passage, or else Dunn, if he was present and in command, lacked the nerve necessary for directing such an assaulting party. Whichever was the cause, I desired to satisfy myself — I must seal the tunnel, or else (the idea coming to me as an inspiration) lead a sortie through it, and thus take the unconscious besiegers in the rear. But what about Donald? We could not leave him here, nor could we hope to drag him back up that long ladder into the house, for the man had lost much blood, and appeared weak as a babe. Besides, if I would plan intelligently, I needed to learn something definite regarding the terminus of this tunnel, as well as of the force of Confederates surrounding the house.

"How far are we from the entrance?" I questioned, picking up the lantern.

"Not over fifty feet, I should say. You pass out through a trap door into a log storehouse."

"Could you manage to walk that far?"

He held on to O'Brien and the wall, thus succeeding in lifting himself until he stood erect, but his movements were so weak and uncertain that I grasped him also. In this manner, moving with great care, we advanced slowly along the passage. Donald uttered no sound, but his clenched teeth, and the beads of perspiration on his forehead, told of pain almost insupportable. Twice we permitted him to lie back on the packed earth

floor to rest, but I durst not waste much time in this way, and felt obliged to force him again to his feet. He was swaying dizzily when we finally attained the foot of a short ladder leading upward. The trap was closed, yet as I held the lantern higher I could perceive the outlines of the door. Donald sank to the floor, the weight of his body bearing the boy with him, and lay there with eyes closed, and hand pressed against his head. He was evidently suffering greatly, but in the stress of the moment I could scarcely afford him much consideration.

"Is the trap locked?"

His eyes opened slightly, staring deeply at the lantern flame.

"No; all you need do is push against it."

I climbed the few steps of the ladder, leaving the light below, and, without great effort, lifted the door, turning it silently back until it rested securely against some obstacle. I could perceive little outside the narrow zone of light radiating from below, yet the small room into which my head projected appeared unoccupied, no movement or sound attracting attention. Satisfied as to this, I returned below, considerably puzzled as to how Donald was to be got up the ladder. Water from the canteen applied externally, with the last dregs of the brandy flask as inward stimulant, brought the injured man once again to his feet. I buckled the sling-strap of the carbine beneath his arms, and led the way, O'Brien boosting sturdily from below, and thus, aided a little by his own efforts, we succeeded in dragging his almost inert body up the short reach of ladder, and out upon the floor above. His

dead weight taxed our strength to the utmost, and the man fainted as his head fell back upon the planks, and he lay limp and scarcely breathing. For the moment O'Brien and I were in but slightly better condition, our muscles aching, our breath like sobs.

CHAPTER XXII

A RECONNAISSANCE

MY own exhaustion, complete as it was temporarily, was not lasting. I held the lantern before Donald's face, bending down to make certain he still breathed, and then began searching for the door of the cabin. There was a variety of articles piled within, but a comparatively clear lane had been left between them leading to the single entrance, which was secured by a simple latch. The night remained exceedingly dark without, but I hid the lantern within a box, and endeavored to make something of the immediate surroundings. We were directly to the rear of the house, another small cabin standing between us and the kitchen ell. Some ten or fifteen feet away I made out the black outlines of a well-curb, with a sweep above it, and beyond that rose the trunk of a large tree. This comprised about all I could distinguish with any certainty, while the intense quietness of the night seemed more like a dream than a reality. Could it be possible those silent shadows hid fighting men within their sombre depths, men with guns in their hands, and the desire to kill in their hearts? I called to O'Brien in a whisper, and the lad came to me instantly.

"See if you can fill your canteen there at the well with-

out making a noise," and I pointed toward the vague outline. "You had better creep, and keep your eyes wide open."

He was not absent more than five minutes, clinging close to the darker shadows in his passage, moving more like a snake than a man. Donald stirred and groaned, but I clung watchfully to the doorway until the boy came safe back.

"There was wather in the pail, sor," he explained, letting me feel the wet canteen, "an' there 's two or three fellows sittin' there on the back porch."

"Were those all you saw?"

"I heard a noise by the head of the arbor, but it was too black in there to see anything."

"Well, you go inside and remain with Colonel Donald. Don't permit him any opportunity to get away or sound an alarm. Keep fresh water on his wound, but don't venture to leave him a minute. I am going to take a look around, but will not be gone more than twenty minutes. You understand?"

"I do, sor."

I waited in the doorway until he had vanished, and then crept cautiously forth, moving slowly backward down the short line of negro cabins, until I attained the edge of a small grove. Under this concealment I circled to the right, purposing to advance through the weeds along the east of the grape arbor. I remembered the lay of the land in this direction fairly well, and felt convinced the force of attacking Confederates would be drawn as close in to the house as the shelter would permit. I had no

reason to suppose the number of men opposing us was very considerable; their apparent unwillingness to assault — for they must have known we were a small party — bespoke weakness, and the probable waiting for reinforcements. Every rifle under such circumstances would be on the firing line, and they would anticipate no approach from the rear. Confident in this respect I crept well around, and then began worming my way in toward the grape arbor, discovering nothing to obstruct progress. The thickness of the vines finally prevented further advance in this direction, and I consequently turned more toward the front of the house, heading directly toward a great tree, at the north end of the arbor. The spreading branches cast so black a shadow that I was almost within arm's length of the trunk before becoming aware that two men were standing there together, their backs toward me. It was the sound of a voice which first awakened me to the peril of the position in which I had unwittingly placed myself.

"Theilen will certainly be here by daylight, and then we shall have enough men to turn the trick. That was his messenger who just left."

"How much of a force will he bring?" It was Calvert Dunn who asked the question.

"He should have a hundred men, with my fellows picked up on the way. He was sent over to Bitter Creek to waylay a Yankee foraging party."

There was a pause; Dunn kicked restlessly at the root of the tree.

"Well, it can't be more than an hour now until day-

light," he said, at last, "and altogether that will give us about one hundred and sixty-five, won't it?"

"That or more; my fellows have been dropping in here all night, and you brought five with you."

"I did n't expect to fall into this sort of an affair," in a tone of evident disgust. "I merely came over to take back that Yankee prisoner to camp. Did you count the blue-bellies?"

"No; but there are about twenty of them, I reckon, and they must have bottled up the Colonel, or he'd have been out here with us before this. Those fellars can shoot, too, better'n any troopers I ever come up against before." He paused, thinking. "Did n't you say a while ago, Lieutenant, that you knew a way leadin' into the house that would let us take 'em in the ra'ar?"

"Yes, I did, Dodd; but there 's no use trying to turn that trick until we get more men. If Theilen reaches here by daylight we'll gobble up that whole Yankee outfit easy, but it 's better to wait and make a clean job. As things are they can't possibly get away."

"Some of 'em will sure get hurt if they ever try it. Well, I'm goin' 'round the lines again, Lieutenant. Maybe you better wait here, where I can find you easy. Besides, this is about where Theilen will strike for when he comes. He'll follow that path up from the creek, most likely."

The guerilla sauntered off, gun across his shoulder, and I crouched low behind the grape arbor until he passed, his footsteps noiseless on the soft earth. Dunn remained quiet a moment, and then sauntered slowly round

behind the tree trunk, and I heard him scratching a match. It blazed into a tiny flame, and he attempted to light a cigar, the slight glow illumining his face. A window of the house spit flame to the sharp crack of a carbine, the ball tearing along the bark of the tree. My rascals within were evidently awake, and the startled Lieutenant dropped the blazing match as though it had burnt his fingers. Another carbine spoke from a window further to the left, the missile whistling through the air between us. Then everything became silent and black again.

So Dunn intended to resort to the secret passage, as soon as he had gathered men enough to safely risk the attempt; and he was the only one in the party who was aware of its existence. Then my work was cut out for me — I must take care of Dunn. Yet how was this to be accomplished? I felt no personal fear of the fellow, merely of the alarm he might raise, thus cutting off my retreat, and overturning all my plans. Besides, there was brief time in which to arrange the play, with both daylight and Theilen already so close at hand. Theilen! Why, of course a report of his approach would throw Dunn off his guard, and I might inveigle the fellow far enough back from the lines to make an open attack possible. Here, at least, was the only course which seemed to promise success. I tore off my jacket, turning it inside out to hide the gleam of buttons; ripped off the insignia from the front of my slouch hat, and pulled the wide brim low over my eyes. There would be nothing natty about Theilen's irregulars, and the color of my clothes could not be

easily guessed at in the gloom. All else was sheer luck and audacity. I was within five feet of the fellow before he even saw me, and the ludicrous manner in which he leaped backward, clawing for the revolver in his belt, almost caused me to laugh outright. Yet, before he could draw the weapon, I asked hurriedly,

"Is this Captain Dodd?"

"N — no; I am an officer of Johnston's staff," peering forward in a vain endeavor to decipher my face. "Who are you? What do you want?"

"I have been sent forward by Captain Theilen. He wants to know where he is to bring his men."

The Lieutenant stiffened up, the slight faltering of his voice vanished in an effort at command.

"Oh, I see. Well, I am technically in command here, being of the regular service. Where is Theilen?"

"Back yonder on the creek; he 's waitin' for orders, an' a guide."

"Well, hurry back and bring him up — you know the way, don't you?"

I stared off into the black night, as though it hid a thousand mysteries.

"Well, I don't exactly know," I confessed unwillingly. "I got here all right because the firing from the house sorter guided me; but them weeds is mighty confusin', an' I reckon it will take me a right smart while to find my way back again. You could n't go along, could you?"

There was nothing in the request to arouse suspicion, yet he hesitated, apparently at first inclined to refuse, perhaps considering such a service beneath his dignity.

"Maybe if you got me as far as the head of that path I might make the rest all right," I suggested doubtfully.

It was plain enough he would prefer remaining where he was, but anxiety to have these welcome reinforcements hurried forward caused him grudgingly to consent.

"How large a force have you?"

"A few over a hundred, I reckon."

"Well, come on; I'll show you to the path. You could follow that with your eyes blindfolded."

I had forgotten the way myself, or rather the night confused me as to the points of compass, yet as he started off to the right I followed, perfectly satisfied so long as every step took us farther away from the immediate vicinity of the house. We were not challenged, evidence enough that no guards had been stationed to prevent possible approach from this direction, and my guide pushed ahead rapidly, familiar with every inch of the route. We had traversed the orchard, and were upon the edge of the weed patch, when he came to a sharp halt.

"Here 's where the path begins leading down to the creek. It 's not very straight, but you can't lose it, for the growth is solid on both sides."

"It all looks the same to me," staring beyond him. "Where did you say the entrance was?"

"Right here in front," half angrily. "What is the matter with your eyes? I'll lead you into it, and then, perhaps, you can follow your nose."

He gripped my sleeve, forcing me forward. The next instant I had my leg twined about his, my hand on his throat, and he went to the ground as though felled by a

blow, the breath squeezed out of him, too thoroughly astounded to struggle. I never had an easier job at taming a man, and before he got his scattered senses together, I pressed a revolver barrel against his temple, threatening instant death if he so much as moved. Whatever other ambitions Lieutenant Calvert Dunn may have possessed, departure from life was surely not included, and I doubt if he winked an eyelash while I stripped him of weapons, and tightly buckled his waistbelt about his arms, binding them helplessly against the body.

"Sorry to be compelled to treat you in this manner," I remarked coolly, "but it seems to be your luck to get in my way constantly. Besides, I believe you advocated hanging me only a few hours ago."

He recognized me then, and the sudden gust of anger overcame his prudence, yielding him voice. He burst forth into a volley of oaths.

"Stop that!" the words like bullets, the grip of my hand shutting off his wind. "I hold your life in this one finger, and you either obey me, or die. How many men are about this house?"

He squirmed under the pressure of the gun barrel, but comprehended the necessity for an immediate answer.

"About sixty."

"All Donald's guerillas?"

"Except the small squad I brought with me."

"How are they posted?"

"Thirty or so in front of the house; perhaps a dozen at the rear; the others scattered so as to watch the side windows."

"No patrols thrown out to protect the rear?"

"Not so far as I know: there may be a picket on the main road. We had no reason to expect any Yanks from this direction."

There was no occasion to doubt the truth of his replies, and they coincided exactly with my own conception of the situation. These were irregulars, and not disciplined soldiers, trained merely as raiders, and naturally careless as to guard lines. Besides, they had every reason to suppose the small body of Federal cavalry opposing them were without supports, and securely bottled up within the house. All they had to do was to await reinforcements, and then force surrender. Any thought of a rear attack had not once occurred to them. The situation was certainly to my liking, but what could I do with Dunn? I possessed no efficient means of binding and gagging the fellow so as to leave him safely behind, and, if Theilen was really expected by daylight, every minute was of value, the smallness of my force making it necessary that I keep the enemy separated, fighting a detachment at a time. Delay meant daylight, and an enemy outnumbering us five to one. The only feasible method was to take the Lieutenant with me back to the hut, where O'Brien could stand guard over him; while I gathered together our men for a sortie. With this in view I gripped him by the collar, hauling him roughly to his feet.

"Now, Dunn, keep exactly one step ahead of me along the edge of these weeds until you reach the orchard. Yes, I know where we are going, and any effort to break

away or any noise, will put you beyond rescue. Step out lively now, only be quiet about it."

I can sincerely say this for him, he was a good prisoner, although I heard him swearing fiercely under his breath, doubtless because of suspicions of me, expecting every moment to have his throat cut. Anyway, he pushed on exactly as I ordered, and, no one intercepting us, we reached the rear of the hut in good order. I could hear the voices of the guard conversing on the back porch of the house, but they caught no glimpse of our stealthy movements, and we slipped within the shelter of the cabin, where O'Brien promptly held us up with levelled carbine.

CHAPTER XXIII

WE ORGANIZE A SORTIE

O'BRIEN was very clearly in a mood to shoot first, and make inquiries afterwards, yet even in that darkness he recognized my voice, and consented to lower the gun which was jammed against my breast. A hasty word of explanation served to make him comprehend who my companion was, and, with Dunn safely held between us, we wormed our way back to where Donald was lying breathing heavily, and occasionally moaning as if in delirium. He had not recovered consciousness, according to the lad's account, and I began to suspect concussion of the brain. I paused long enough to feel his pulse, which appeared rapid and strong, yet there was nothing we could do to relieve his condition beyond the application of water. I used O'Brien's belt to strap the Lieutenant's feet together, placed him in as comfortable a position as possible, and then, with strict injunction to the trooper to remain close beside both men, took up the extinguished lantern, and groped my way down the short ladder to the dismal tunnel, closing the trap behind me.

While the brisk action of the past half-hour had served somewhat to steady my nerves, yet the memory of that ghostly woman's face still haunted me, and I felt no inclination to attempt that passage alone in the darkness.

The possibilities of murder lurked at every step, and while I was not truly afraid, I felt my flesh creep at the thought, and took precaution to light the lantern the instant I was safe at the foot of the ladder. Holding it well in advance, yet not so as to blind my eyes, I hurried forward, watchful of the shadows, but with mind busy with details of the coming attempt at escape. Here certainly lay our only chance of getting away. If we delayed until after daylight, and Theilen's command arrived meanwhile, we would be caught like rats in a trap. But if we could manage to strike Dodd's scattered followers from the rear, surprising them by suddenness of attack, we might succeed in breaking away, and, by swift marching, attain our own lines in safety. This plan offered a fighting chance, at least, and the more I studied it, the stronger became its appeal. I knew fairly well the physical surroundings without, where Dodd's men were posted, the points for concealment, and the straight road leading out of the valley. If my little band of troopers would only fight — and I had small doubt as to that — there could be little question as to results, provided only we struck before reinforcements arrived.

My passage was unobstructed, and I arrived at the bottom of the ladder stairs, having seen nothing but the bare stone walls, and the hard-packed earth floor, reflected by the yellow glow of the lantern. But at the top I met with a surprise which left me staring blindly, for the moment distrusting my own eyes: there was no opening into the hall! The mantel had been swung back into place, leaving me fronting an apparently solid wall.

Everything on the inside was, seemingly, as we had left it; the revolving door must have been operated from within the house, and, as I searched in vain for any sign of a secret spring, I swore at myself for a fool for not having posted a guard in protection. Who could have done this? Surely that heavy mantel would never have swung back into position without human assistance. Who in the house would have any reason to operate it except Jean Denslow? The possibility of her escaping from that room in which I had locked her had not before seriously occurred to me, yet hers was a nature to dare much, and achieve. Besides, she would have an object in such an act, and sufficient spirit to carry it out. If she had done the trick, then she would be on guard within. I had no hope she would open to me, but the knowledge of Donald's serious condition might appeal to her. Partisan as she was, loyal to her cause, yet the woman in her would conquer. I rapped against the front of the chimney, pausing to listen, but hearing no sound in response. Then I put my lips close and spoke loud enough so I felt certain my voice would carry to the hall without.

"Miss Denslow, are you there?"

Nothing beyond the dim echo rewarded this effort; yet so convinced was I of her presence that I persevered, determined to say something which should arouse her to betrayal.

"I am Lieutenant King; we found Colonel Donald seriously wounded, in the tunnel, and I have come back after help. For the sake of his life open this door."

I heard her then distinctly, her voice sounding so clearly

as to startle me by its nearness; apparently there was nothing between us but the thin steel of the fire-screen.

"Are — are you telling me the truth?"

"As God is my witness, yes; I am alone, and O'Brien is with Donald. If you care to save his life you must let me through."

"But I cannot! I do not know how the door opens."

"Pull straight upward on the andiron farthest to the north."

She obeyed without the slightest hesitation, and the mantel swung so suddenly I barely escaped being struck. The next instant, lantern still in hand, I was beside her, noting how she shrank back, half frightened, at my quick appearance from out the black recess.

"Don't be alarmed," I exclaimed hastily, feeling nothing must longer delay my plans. "No, you are not to go into that hole alone. There is something mysterious about the passage; we found Donald with his throat slashed, exactly as those others were, only he still lives, and I believe will recover. I mean to take you to him in a moment, but you must wait here until I come back. You will, will you not? I can trust you?"

Her face was white, her eyes full of appeal.

"Yes, yes, but — but are you certain he will live?"

Even then these words, the deep feeling in the voice, hurt, almost angered me. There had been a time, a few brief hours only, when she actually seemed mine, not only through the formality of that strange marriage ceremony, but by reason of the awakening of her own heart. I recognized now how utterly foolish this dream was, yet I

could not entirely banish the memory, or look into her face, and feel content. I felt like fronting and combating this fate which so completely separated us; this love born to her life before I had ever entered into it at all. Yet the uselessness of such an endeavor was so plainly apparent, the very bitterness made me smile. She was not thinking of me at all, merely of him; but for his wound, his danger, I should be still locked helplessly in that tunnel; for my sake alone she would never have answered any plea for release.

"There is no apparent reason why he should not," I answered, not altogether pleasantly. "There is nothing particularly serious about his injuries so far as I could discover. A surgeon and a nurse could bring him around in short order. The important matter is to get back to him just as soon as possible. No, Miss Denslow," and I caught her by the arm in restraint, "you are not to venture into that passage alone. I shall be back here in a moment to accompany you."

"But why cannot I go? You say he is hurt and suffering, and yet order me not to go to him."

"I merely request you to remain here for a moment until we can guard you through the tunnel."

"Guard me?" her eyes searching the dark opening. "From what? Is there any peril there?"

"Honestly, I do not know, but it is no place for you to attempt to traverse alone. I will not permit it. See, I am going to trust you fully to wait my return. Take this revolver, and watch that opening until I come back."

She accepted it, our hands touching for an instant, be-

fore a vague suspicion of my real purpose dawned upon her.

"What — what are you planning to do? Take your men through here?"

"Yes," I acknowledged, already at the head of the stairs. "This is our opportunity for escape."

"And you believe I will be an accomplice? You intend to use me for the defeat of my own people?"

"No, Miss Denslow," and I came back, looking directly into her indignant eyes. "There is no manner in which you can possibly prevent our escape in this way unless you deliberately choose to kill me. You can do that, for you have my weapon in your hand, and I stand here unarmed. Are you willing to do that for the Confederacy?"

I saw the flush sweep into her cheeks, the gray-blue eyes falling before mine.

"No — no," she faltered, "not that."

"Then you are helpless to interfere. We are going out this way. I desire to take you with us to the assistance of Colonel Donald; but if it is your intention to make trouble, then we shall have to lock you up again, and leave you behind. Which is your choice?"

She could not doubt my sincerity, for the earnestness with which I spoke was convincing. Her eyes uplifted to mine for one single questioning instant.

"I will wait," she said slowly, "but — but I believe I hate you."

I bowed, holding my hat in hand.

"I would far rather you felt thus, Miss Denslow,"

I returned quietly, "than to be utterly indifferent toward me."

I caught her sudden look of surprise, the quick uplift of her face, but before she could find expression in words, I had slipped down the stairs to the hall. Masterson was in the doorway of the parlor, and stepped out into the hall as I came down.

"I did n't know where you could have gone, sir," he said, evidently pleased to see me again. "I went up stairs there once, but did n't see no signs of you anywhere."

"You were on the second story?"

"Yes; one of those women was makin' such a racket, I went up to see what the trouble might be. Seems she'd got locked in somehow, and I had to bust the latch to get her out. Blame pretty girl, too, but Reb clean through, I guess, for she hardly give me a word o' thanks, an' would n't come downstairs."

So that was the manner in which she had achieved her release! Simple enough, and all because I had forgotten the first principles of a soldier, the protection of the rear.

"Yes, she 's Rebel, Masterson, and, as it happens, I locked her in there myself. However, there 's no great harm done. But we've got business before us now. Leave two troopers at each of those front windows, and assemble all the others in the hall here at once."

They came straggling forth from the various doorways, blackened with powder smoke and sleepy-eyed from the long night vigil, yet a fairly tough-looking bunch of

fighting men, and ranged themselves before me. They had scarcely had opportunity to observe me before in the rush of that first attack, but the cavalry officer's uniform I wore had an immediate effect, and they remained respectfully silent, leaning on their carbines, waiting for me to speak. I stood on the first stair, looking them over, waiting until Masterson was ready to report.

"All here, sir, except four at the front windows."

"Good enough, Corporal; sixteen I make the number, counting yourself."

"Yes, sir," running his eyes along the faces. "There was thirty-four of us left camp on this rampage, an' we've got a dead an' wounded list o' ten so far. It was that first volley that dropped so many."

"Well, men," I said soberly, "we're going out of this, but we are liable to have a bit of stiff fighting before we get away. I'll explain the situation, because you will have to operate in the dark, and each man must use his own judgment to some extent, although we will try to keep together. Those fellows out yonder are part of Donald's band of guerillas, with a small squad of regular cavalry. They'll outnumber us a little over three to one, but are scattered around the house, the main force bunched in front. I've been out and looked them over, and if we can strike them suddenly in the rear we ought to have them on the run in five minutes. They have n't any guards out, and I have found a secret passage leading underground to a negro cabin a hundred feet west of the house kitchen. But we've got to act at once, and before daylight, for

another bunch of those fellows are marching this way, and may show up at any minute. Are you lads ready for a scrap?"

Their faces, as well as voices, answered.

"You could count on the Third Ohio, sir, if you was goin' ter charge hell," said the Corporal, his eyes blazing. "Was you goin' to leave the four at the windows?"

"Yes; order them to stay there and keep up their fire, until we come around and attack the bunch in front. Then have them throw open the door and join us. Are you boys ready?"

"All ready, sir; all ready," the tones eager and expectant, the grimy hands hard on the brown carbine barrels.

"Then come on by twos; Masterson, take the rear."

As I turned to step upon the stair above, two shots suddenly rang out in the upper hall, the sharp reports those of a revolver. Jean! It must be Jean! I leaped forward, the men racing at my heels.

CHAPTER XXIV

ANOTHER MURDER

SHE stood, crouching slightly, half-way between the stair-head and the end of the hall, staring into the blackness of the open fireplace, the revolver yet smoking in her hand. Her posture was that of fear, controlled by will power. Already, half suspecting the truth, I sprang forward and grasped her arm.

"What was it, Miss Denslow? What were you firing at?"

The tenseness of her muscles gave way, and her slender form swayed back against the support of my shoulder, one hand clasping at my sleeve.

"At something there — there! God knows what; it looked like a woman, but such a face — such a face!"

"Yes, yes; I understand; I have seen the same," I said hastily. "It was in fear of such an appearance again that I gave you the revolver. Yet what is it — a vision of the brain, or a reality? I have examined every inch of that tunnel; I came through it alone ten minutes ago, and saw nothing. No one could enter from the other end, or from this, without being seen. The mystery puzzles me."

She drew away from my support, trembling still, yet already more resolute.

"That was no vision, no spectre which I saw," she insisted. "See! there is a spot of blood on the screen. She came directly toward me out of that hole, creeping on all fours like a wild beast. I was near the head of the stairs endeavoring to hear what you were saying below. Something made me turn suddenly, and I saw her — saw her eyes, her claw-like fingers, the flash of a knife in her hand. Oh, it frightened me so; I stood there like a bird fascinated by a snake, but I had the revolver in my hand, and pulled the trigger — see! there is where the first ball went, straight down into the floor! I thought you would hear and come; but the sound of the shot nerved me, and, the second time, I fired straight at her, and — and — and she cried out sharply, and seemed to fade into that blackness there like a ghost. But it was no ghost; ghosts don't leave blood-stains behind them, and that is blood there on the screen."

Masterson edged forward, with cocked carbine, and bent down to examine the stain.

"It 's blood all right, Lieutenant," he announced cheerfully, evidently relieved himself. "Whatever the young lady saw, an' took a pop at, was human enough, an' I guess we ain't got no cause to be held back here by no one woman an' a knife."

There was considerable sense in that.

"True for you, Corporal. Miss Denslow, let me have the revolver again. I'll go in first with the lantern, and you men follow as rapidly as possible. Masterson, help the lady, and don't leave her alone for a moment."

We dropped into the hole one by one, picking our way down the ladder as best we could. I was first to reach the earth floor, and stood there, holding the lantern high above my head, its yellow rays feebly illuminating the rungs, until the last trooper came scrambling down beside me. It was an odd-looking party thus dimly revealed in that narrow space between those stone walls, the men's faces appearing sallow, their eyes staring about wonderingly. I edged my way past them to take up the lead again.

"This tunnel runs directly west, lads," I explained briefly. "There are no turns, and nothing to fall over. All you've got to do is walk straight, and follow me."

Masterson was next to me in line, the girl beside him, the whiteness of her face conspicuous. I smiled back into her eyes, but met with no response, and plunged forward, more angry with myself than her. The dull thud of the feet behind, naturally falling into marching step, awoke muffled echoes, and I flung the light as far ahead as possible down the tunnel. It was bare, unoccupied. What had become of that woman? Where was she when I traversed this black passage alone? Surely she could never have stolen in after me without being seen by O'Brien; and, if she had fled this way, wounded by Jean's shot, she could never get away through that trap door, without alarming those watchers in the negro cabin. Yet there was no place of hiding here — not even a skurrying rat could have escaped our scrutiny, and the lantern light flashed into every nook and corner in a vain effort at

revealing anything suspicious. The mystery oppressed me, caused me almost to doubt the facts, and to question the evidence of my own senses.

At the foot of the short ladder I handed the lantern to one of the men — a young fellow, with slight moustache, I remember — taking his carbine with me with which to pry up the trap door.

"Hold the light until all are up," I commanded, "and then blow it out before you climb the ladder."

From the floor of the cabin I reached down, and Masterson passed up the girl, my hands steadying her as she clambered eagerly up. In the darkness I could not see where the wounded man lay, but I managed to touch O'Brien, whispering to him to take her at once to Donald. I heard a kiss, the murmur of low voices conversing, and, with gritted teeth, turned back to hasten the movements of the men below.

"Up with you, lads — no talking, but come up, one at a time."

I leaned over, counting as they came up, their forms outlined by the flame of the lantern in the tunnel. The last one clambered through the opening, and found room to stand in the narrow space. The soldier below, the light on his upturned face, still held the lantern level with his head.

"Shall I put it out now, sir, and come up?" he questioned, as though doubtful of his former orders.

"Yes — they are all here."

I saw him turn down the wick, and blow out the flame. In the dense blackness below I heard him set the lantern

down, and place his foot on the first rung of the ladder. Then there was a single sharp cry — startled, agonized — a moan, and the heavy fall of a body. Without a thought I leaped through the hole down into the darkness. I struck against a prostrate figure, stumbled slightly, rattling the lantern with my foot; my extended hand gripped at something, which gave way, and I stood groping blindly about without a sound to guide me. I knew what had happened, and now, the first mad rush over, my heart was in my throat. I felt for the lantern with my foot, found it at last, and managed to apply a match to the wick. At the foot of the ladder lay the soldier, a knife thrust in his throat, his head bent back, his dead eyes staring up at me, in the grip of my fingers was a rag, a strip of red calico, evidently ripped from a dress. That was all. I ran down the tunnel a dozen steps, throwing the light in advance, but saw nothing, heard nothing. The very mystery of it made my flesh creep, and halted me, peering here and there, afraid of my own shadow. That fiend of a woman was there somewhere, skulking in the blackness; we had passed her, and she had stolen along behind us, waiting a chance to strike down some straggler. But where in God's name could she have hidden? Three times I had been through there, searching every inch of the way, and discovered nothing. Who could she be? What spirit of hell could cause her thus to strike down innocent men? For the instant — puzzled, perplexed — I almost doubted her reality, deeming her an illusion, a dream. Yet that dead man yonder was no dream; this strip of red calico, still clutched in my hand, no illusion.

With heart beating rapidly I retraced my steps, moving backwards, the lantern held before me. Masterson, with two troopers, was at the foot of the ladder bending over the motionless form. The Corporal straightened up, his face white.

"Somers is dead, sir," he said, his voice full of horror, "knifed in the throat."

"Yes, Corporal. It is part of the mystery of this house. Within forty-eight hours two men have been killed in exactly the same way in those rooms above, and one lies in the cabin who was stabbed in this tunnel. Now Somers has gone, the assassin stealing on him the moment he put out the light. I jumped as soon as the man cried out, but was too late. All I got hold upon was this strip of cloth — whoever did the job must have fled down the passage."

"That 's a bit of a woman's dress."

"Yes, and it is a woman who has done these murders."

The eyes of the man left my face to gaze down the tunnel, the same questioning thought in each mind.

"That is part of the mystery of it, lads: who is she? what is her object? where can she hide? We have just come through this way, and there has n't been a spot hidden from us big enough to conceal a mouse. It 's my third trip through here to-night, and I have examined the walls from end to end. And yet that woman must have been in here somewhere. You heard the young lady say she shot at the creature who disappeared in this passage. She must have hidden somewhere, and then skulked along behind us, hoping to get a victim. Poor

Somers proved to be the one, and now the fiend has disappeared again."

"How far did you go?"

"Half way to the other ladder. We have n't time to search now, or we shall be too late to save ourselves. It is almost daylight."

There was a moment of silence, the men breathing heavily from excitement, casting uneasy glances about them, and nervously clutching their carbines. I saw faces peering down at us through the open trap.

"Take the body up the ladder, and I will hold the lantern so you can see," I commanded, my determination made.

They went at the gruesome job reluctantly, yet evidently glad enough to get out of the hole, two of them lifting from above, with Masterson helping below. As the Corporal's legs disappeared I mounted close behind, holding the lantern beneath and laying hold of the trap before I extinguished the light. It was with a distinct feeling of relief that I closed the heavy door and stood upon it. I felt a new man as I straightened in the upper air, the heavy breathing of the troopers, closely pressed together in the narrow space, alone telling me of their presence.

"O'Brien!"

"Yis, sor."

"Everything right here?"

"Jist about as ye left it, sor, only the Colonel seems to have got part of his senses back, an' the other fellow swore so loud I bucked him with a bit o' rag. Av ye'll

keep still, sor, I think ye'll hear some noise jist back of the cabin."

We were instantly quiet, the men holding their breath to listen. I could distinguish a sound as though of moving bodies, but was unable to guess at the cause.

"What is it?"

"Horses, sor. They've got them picketed out there — some Reb, an' some Yankee, no doubt."

I crept to the door and took a survey without. So far as I could perceive, the situation had not changed in the least. Over to the eastward was some slight promise of the coming dawn, but there still remained time in which to carry out my plans if we moved promptly.

"Masterson, leave two men here to guard that trap and the prisoners. They will remain until they hear the sound of firing in front of the house, and then mount and join us. We'll leave horses for them. You take half our force and clear out the guard on the kitchen porch — there are six men there. Make it quick action, and as soon as the job is accomplished fall back here behind the cabin. O'Brien, with two of the troopers, attend to any scattered Rebs you find along the north side. The rest of us will see to the horse-herd, and, inside of ten minutes we ought to be in saddle. Don't fire a single shot more than is necessary. Do you understand your work?"

There was the murmur of an answering voice or two, and the shuffling of feet.

"All right then; hit swift, and hard. Masterson, take the six men nearest you."

They filed past me, one by one, crouching down in the shadows just outside the door.

"Now, O'Brien, select the next three, and steal around the other side of that negro cabin. As soon as Masterson goes forward make a run for those bushes along the carriage drive. The rest of you fellows come with me."

I was beginning to enjoy myself now, all memory of the woman in the tunnel, all recollection even of Jean Denslow, driven from my mind by the pressure of action, the necessity of command. I crept to the end of the logs, my men at my heels. Out of sight, yet not far away, a number of horses were champing at their bits, and stomping about uneasily. Some one on the kitchen porch laughed, and a man walked to the well for a drink of water. I turned back, until I could see the crouching figures of the Corporal's squad.

"All right, Masterson," I said, "Go in."

CHAPTER XXV

FROM BATTLE TO LOVE

I SAW them rise swiftly to their feet, and slip noiselessly along the protecting side of the cabin, the dull gray of the eastern sky already rendering things slightly visible; but I waited for nothing more. We likewise had our work to accomplish. A dozen swift steps brought us to the horse herd, nor did we fire a shot, the single guard being so surprised at our unexpected appearance, as to fail even in speech. The horses were tied along a rail fence, completely equipped, exactly as they were captured at the time of first attack, and my little party swung hastily into saddle, gathering up the bridle reins of as many other horses as we could safely lead. As I held my own bunch back a moment, so as to give all the men time to gather more closely in, three shots — two the sharp reports of carbines, the third the gruffer note of a musket — sounded beyond the negro cabins, while, in the dim light of the dawn I caught glimpses of men gathering around the corner of the house. Then more shots began to sputter along the north side, two of the swiftly running figures dropping in their tracks, with spits of flame shooting forth from the black shadow of bushes lining the driveway. The surprise was complete, the two squads performing their work thoroughly.

Now it was our turn. The troopers were battling with the horses, restive from their long night's quiet, excited by the firing, the four I held struggling at the rein furiously, my mount rearing as if about to throw himself backward.

"Forward!" I cried, my voice barely audible above the hubbub of hoofs. "Hold them to it, boys!"

The others met us at the corner of the house, the daylight sufficient by now to make identity certain; slinging their carbines, they grasped the nearest reins and sprung up into the saddles. It was seemingly the work of an instant, and, in another, Masterson and myself had forced them into irregular line; the rearing, plunging horses were brought under control, the faces of the men showing eager and alert in the gray dawn. They felt the straining bodies between their legs, and all the joy of the cavalry service was in their hearts. They could fight now in their own way — with the reckless dash of the trooper.

"Any one hurt, Corporal?"

"No, sir; it was an easy job."

"Your men here, O'Brien?"

"Ivery wan, sor."

"All right; draw revolvers; forward march; trot."

We swept down the broad driveway in two lines, the men widening their distances so as to give room for sabre play when necessary, Masterson and I slightly in advance. The gray dawn already revealed our surroundings clearly; the ash-covered roadway, the bushes along its edge, the row of trees beyond, a long tobacco shed at the left, the half-open gate almost directly in front. We might have

ridden straight for it, and, possibly, escaped without the exchange of a shot, but the spirit of fight was upon us now — we wanted to charge those fellows, ride them down under the horses' hoofs, scatter them to the four winds. As we whirled recklessly about the corner, every man riding low, every eye forward, we saw the enemy at the edge of a grove, some kneeling, others standing. It was merely a glimpse, and then they fired — an instant too quick, perhaps — the irregular cracking showing lack of discipline, the cloud of smoke hiding them again from us. I felt my horse leap as if touched; two or three in our front rank went down, but there was no halting. My mount caught his stride, and I drove in the spur, yelling the charge, hearing the thunder of hoofs behind mingled with an exultant cheer from the men. We drove through the rising smoke cloud like a thunderbolt, and were on them, our revolvers spitting viciously to right and left, our horses pawing at the fleeing figures and at the clubbed muskets with which they sought to fight us back. We went through them as if they had been paper; some ran for the fields, scrambling over a fence, but the main body, still bunched together, firing as rapidly as they could reload, Dodd cursing in the midst of them, made for the shelter of the grape arbor. The fierceness of our rush carried us through the grove out onto the turf of the open lawn, the men struggling with their horses, in an effort to re-form. Out from the front door sprang the four troopers left within, running eagerly for the riderless animals, while the two guards from the negro cabin came spurring madly around the corner of the house, anxious

to join their comrades. Half formed, the men spurring their frenzied horses into some semblance of line, we swept down upon the fleeing guerillas, seeking to overtake them before they could attain shelter. It was a helter-skelter race, the bang of musketry punctuated by the sharp revolver reports, and the shouts and yells of the combatants. We reached the rear runners, riding them down remorselessly, but our horses swerved at the arbor entrance, two plunging forward throwing their riders, the others debouching sharply to the left, the troopers sawing at the reins in vain effort at control. The black which I rode was for the moment perfectly unmanageable, rearing and plunging, the grip of my knees alone keeping me in the saddle. We crashed through a fringe of bushes, that served somewhat to protect us from the increasing musketry fire, enabling me to thrust my smoking revolver back into the belt, and thus, both hands free, obtain some control over the frightened brute.

It was fully daylight now, every surrounding object clear to the eye, and my little squad circled about, instinctively forming themselves for another charge. I swept them with my eyes, debating whether to try an advance on horseback, or to dismount and endeavor on foot to dislodge the enemy. Suddenly O'Brien swept his hand to the east, and I perceived a party of horsemen emerging from the weeds, breaking into a sharp trot the instant they attained the open ground. The movement was plain enough — Theilen had arrived, already understood the situation, and was pushing his force forward to strike us in the rear. Within five minutes we would be helpless,

every avenue of escape blocked. This was no time to consider strategy or attack — we must ride for it, ride hard and fast. I swung my horse around.

"Close up men! by fours into line! ride for the gate, and the road beyond. Corporal, take the lead, and I will cover the rear. Don't spare your horses."

Every man knew, realized fully the peril threatening us. Dodd's gang had not yet perceived the advance of reinforcements, and were holding their fire expecting us to charge. Instead we wheeled to the right and rode straight at the open gate. Behind us, but not yet within shooting distance, we could already hear the pounding of the hoofs of Theilen's column, as they spurred forward in pursuit. A few muskets barked from the grape arbor; some fellow lying hidden in a corner of the fence let drive, sending the Corporal headlong; then we were outside, on the hard-packed road, the men riding recklessly, bent low over their pommels, urging their horses to the utmost. I must have been fifty feet to the rear, trusting to my horse, half turned about in the saddle so as to watch our pursuers. I never knew what happened, whether the animal stumbled, or fell from a wound, but suddenly I was shot through the air, everything blotted out in an instant as I came crashing down to earth. My last memory was of seeing Theilen's horsemen crowding through the gate, a hundred yards away, yelling and shaking their guns; of a dozen men on foot running across the open, puffs of white smoke showing their efforts to reach us at long range; and then I was gone — gone into black oblivion.

I was in an invalid's chair when I came back to consciousness, lying as though upon a bed, yet fully dressed. Someway as my hands groped about, telling me this — for everything was speckled before my eyes — I thought of Judge Dunn, and of the chair in which he sat when I last saw him. I felt no pain, only a dull ache extending through both body and head, and slowly the disfiguring mist cleared from before my eyes, and I began distinguishing objects. At first they were vague, shapeless, unfamiliar; but as I stared at them, the delirium left my brain, and they assumed natural proportions. The room was a strange one, nothing bringing back to me any recollection of the past. It was large and square, having four long windows, three of the curtains being drawn, the fourth sufficiently raised to permit a gleam of sunshine to extend partly across the rich carpet of dark green. The furniture was that of a well-appointed chamber, of light wood, giving to the apartment a clean, cheerful appearance. An unusually large mirror topped the dresser, and I caught sight of myself in the glass, marking the pallor of my face, rendered more noticeable perhaps by a bandage about my forehead. Wherever I was it was evident that neglect was not my portion, and if this was prison, capture was not altogether an unpleasant experience. Still the situation puzzled me, especially as memory returned, and I recalled the incidents of the fight, my fall, and the nature of my probable captors. Those fellows would not show much mercy, for we had certainly cost them dearly; and I could not imagine Calvert Dunn, or Dodd, bringing me into such comfortable quarters as these.

Either other influence had prevailed, or else Federal reinforcements had arrived in the nick of time, and driven the guerillas from the field. This was the most reasonable supposition, for by now I was beginning to guess where I was — this must be the front chamber of the Dunn house. I had explored it in the dark, yet recalled enough of the interior arrangement to feel convinced of its identity. I had to turn slightly to see the door; it stood partially ajar — proof either that I was not being held prisoner, or else that I was considered too badly injured for escape.

I felt no pain, otherwise than the dull aching, and sat up, throwing aside the quilt which covered me. I moved my limbs, testing them, fearing I must be hurt more seriously than was apparent to account for all this care, yet discovered them equal to every requirement. I was partly upon my feet, with a hand grasping the arm of the chair, because of a slight sensation of dizziness, when the door was pushed silently back and a woman took a single step within, instantly pausing, her eyes upon me. It was a face I had seen but once before, yet instantly recognized — the rather weak face of Lucille Dunn, its only claim to beauty the large dark eyes. My sudden return to life and activity must have greatly surprised her, for she stood staring at me in speechless bewilderment; then, before I could move, she slipped back into the hall and disappeared. I heard her call something outside, and had advanced half across the room, when Jean came in quietly, closed the door behind her, and faced me, her lips firmly set, her eyes upon mine.

"I had not anticipated so rapid a recovery," she said

slowly. "You were still unconscious when I left a very few moments ago."

"You have been my nurse?"

"Lucille and I together; perhaps I may call myself the head nurse."

There was something about her manner which made me anxious to learn the truth as to my situation.

"Am I a prisoner, Miss Denslow?"

"You are not. Colonel Donald and I are not entirely ungrateful. You have been left here wounded, and in our care, but at liberty to depart whenever you are able, and desire to do so. We do not care to feel under obligations to you personally."

"You speak very coldly."

"As I have ample reason to. If Lieutenant Elbert King will be seated I will explain the situation more in detail."

I sank back into the chair, instantly aware that she knew me now, that the moment I had dreaded so long had arrived. There was a certainty in her tone which convinced me any denial would be useless. Loss of blood had left me weak and faint, yet I sat up straight enough, my hands on the arms of the chair, nerved by excitement to face whatever might be impending. The girl's voice was low yet clear, vibrant with feeling, but with no touch of anger.

"First I will explain briefly your present position," she began, "so that henceforth there can be no misunderstanding between us. During the retreat of your men — the majority of whom got safely away — your horse was shot,

and you were thrown upon your head and rendered unconscious. That occurred soon after daylight this morning, and you have remained in that condition until a few moments ago. It is now late in the afternoon. The mounted men followed your troopers, skirmishing with them as far as the ridge road, but some of those on foot, finding you still alive, brought you back here. Through the authority of Colonel Donald you have been left here practically unguarded, and, in remembrance of services rendered us both, we have decided to give you an opportunity for escape. We have no desire to be outdone in courtesy by a Yankee."

"Colonel Donald, then has recovered? Does he remain here?"

"He has regained sufficient strength to resume command. His chief lieutenant was killed during the action, and he felt obliged to accompany his men for the present."

"And Lieutenant Dunn?"

She smiled slightly, a welcome relief to the fixed sternness of her lips.

"He would have liked greatly to remain as your guard, but was persuaded to convey the prisoners, and wounded, to the Confederate camp. I imagine he may return when that duty has been completed. There seems to be some trouble between Lieutenant Dunn and Lieutenant King."

"Entirely upon the part of the former, although I confess, not wholly without cause. The exigencies of war have compelled me to handle Lieutenant Dunn somewhat roughly on two occasions, yet that should be excusable between fighting men. There may be other reasons."

"What, may I ask?"

I met her questioning eyes fairly, convinced that a certain amount of boldness would not be amiss, and eager to learn the real nature of her feelings.

"Principally, Miss Jean Denslow."

"Oh, indeed!" very prettily simulating surprise, "and what possible interest can you both have in that young lady?"

"You ask seriously?"

"Most assuredly. Who could be more deeply interested than I?"

"Then I will answer frankly. If I mistake not, you were at one time engaged to Lieutenant Dunn."

"Very true."

"And you are now married to Lieutenant King."

She leaned back against the dresser, her cheeks flushed, evidently struggling for self-control.

"Are you not mistaken? I had supposed my husband to be Sergeant King, of Reynolds's Battery."

I leaned toward her across the chair arm, endeavoring to see into the depths of her eyes, but she veiled them behind lowered lashes, and I was compelled to answer blindly.

"He was Sergeant King at the time of your marriage, yet I think you have no doubt as to who he is now."

"I have not had a great deal at any time," she said, looking at me directly, "although I could not be sure. The night of that unfortunate occurrence you seemed to regret my predicament, and expressed a desire to make my burden as light as possible. Would it not have

been best when you came here, to have informed me as to your identity?"

"Yes, if the relationship between us had been the same."

"Had been the same! What do you mean?"

I took a deep breath, mustering my courage to face whatever fate might have in store.

"This, Miss Jean," I said gravely, my voice trembling in spite of every effort to hold it firm. "Since then I have learned to love you."

CHAPTER XXVI

I TALK WITH JEAN

FOR a moment her intense surprise robbed her of all power of speech, her round throat swelling, one hand pressed upon her heart. So still was everything I could hear a bird singing without, and the rustle of wind through the leaves.

"You have learned to love me — me?" she faltered at last incredulously. "I did not expect to hear you say *that*, Lieutenant King."

"Yet I have said it," I insisted, "because it is the truth; and it is time, is it not, that the truth should be known between us?"

Her head drooped upon her hands, her arm supported by the dresser, and she remained silent, her slight form trembling perceptibly.

"Do you blame me for what occurred that night?"

She uplifted her eyes quickly, looking frankly into my face.

"You perhaps did the most natural thing, although I sincerely wish it had never occurred. No, I do not blame you; I — I have never felt in that way toward you. It is strange, is it not?" straightening up, and now looking me again frankly in the eyes. "There is certainly

every reason why I should feel otherwise. I have no sympathy with your cause; all I love is connected with the South, and I am a thorough Rebel. Seeking to serve your flag you did me as grievous an injury as a man could do a woman. At first I was angry, indignant; I could have killed you, and felt my anger just. I can never understand the change which came over me, for, when we finally parted that night, we were almost friends. I have never been able to think of you since as an enemy."

"You have thought of me, then?"

"Could I do otherwise? Sergeant King certainly wrought havoc enough to make immediate forgetfulness impossible. Then Lieutenant King appeared — the artilleryman changed into a cavalry officer — but in voice and manner continually reminding me of the former. I did not know you were the same, but suspected it. I wanted to avoid you, yet that was impossible, and I have been compelled to accept your help, to trust and confide in you. Not only am I personally indebted to you, but you have served others who are near and dear to me. I had almost forgotten you were a Yankee, except for the constant reminder of your uniform. I even felt that we were destined to friendship, in spite of all the barriers between us; but now — now you have spoiled everything."

"I? How?"

"By your avowal — your expression of feeling toward me. You must have spoken those words in jest, and yet they are not easily forgotten."

"In jest!" and I arose to my feet, indignant that she

should even suggest such a possibility. "Miss Denslow, you do not mean that; surely my sincerity can be felt. Perhaps I ought not to have spoken thus; it may be you have no right to listen. But I insist I have said no more than the truth. I realize now that from the moment of first seeing you while conversing with the old negro in the shed on your father's plantation, I was unusually interested in you. That first impression might, indeed, have passed away, had we not again been thrown together upon terms of peculiar intimacy. A certain tie was contracted between us which caused me to think of you even while we were absent from each other. I could not remain indifferent under such circumstances — could you?"

She hesitated, drawing slightly back, yet her honesty compelled a frank avowal.

"No, I — I could not be entirely indifferent."

"Human nature would prevent," I went on, encouraged by even this slight admission. "But our relationship was not destined to end even there. Some strange fate seemed to draw us together. My duty led me here, to meet you again under peculiar circumstances, and in the midst of peril compelling you to trust me. I believe now, Miss Denslow, that the seeds of love were in my heart from the moment of our first meeting, but the intimacy of the past few hours has brought the blossom. Legally I am your husband, and I cannot forbear telling you that my heart is yours also, although I feel I have no right to say this, or to force myself between you and another."

She looked at me in strange bewilderment, her cheeks flushed, her breath rapid.

"I — I do not quite understand; you — you mean Calvert Dunn?"

"Certainly not. You forgot I have already overheard your opinion of the Lieutenant. My reference was to Colonel Donald."

"Oh!" the exclamation of surprise came through her parted lips without effort at restraint. "To Colonel Donald? You mean —"

"That I am not blind to your feeling toward him. Not only your actions, but your words as well, have convinced me that he is more to you than any of us. Am I not correct?"

"I deny the right of Lieutenant King to question me."

"But not that of your husband. This relationship, oddly as it came about, disagreeable as it may be to you, surely entitles me to know the truth."

She hesitated, her lips tightly compressed, as though thus holding back her first impulse to answer.

"Why do you ask this?"

"Because you are legally my wife, because my heart also claims you, and I cannot give you up without cause."

"With cause you will? With cause you will renounce all claim upon me, relinquish all effort to hold me through this form of marriage?"

"Yes," I assented soberly, "I will endeavor to act the part of a gentleman."

There was a moment of silence in which I looked at her, leaning against the dresser with eyes lowered to the

floor. That she was embarrassed, doubtful, was plainly evident. Suddenly her eyes uplifted to mine.

"Ask me your question, and I will answer."

"Do you love Colonel Donald?"

She drew a quick breath, but there was no faltering in her steadfast gaze.

"I do," she said quietly. "Is that all?"

"That is surely enough," bitterly, "as it leaves me nothing further to hope for."

"Is that not best? Would you wish me to act less frankly?"

There was something in the depths of those gray-blue eyes which I could not fathom; something which seemed to contradict the speech of her lips, and to lure me on in unreasoning hopefulness. Perhaps it was a trace of coquetry in her nature she was unable wholly to restrain. Certainly I was not insensible to it, nor could I feel, even yet, as one entirely cast aside.

"I accept your word, Miss Denslow," I answered quietly, "because I must, as I am pledged to it, and yet I feel you are not entirely indifferent toward me — that you do care."

Her lips were compressed, her hands clasping and unclasping nervously.

"Have I ever said otherwise?"

"No, but I wish you might feel justified in confessing. You say I am not a prisoner. I am strong enough now to travel, and, after what you have already said, there is no reason for me to delay departure. The demands of war are not likely to throw us together again, yet I wish

I might bear away with me some knowledge that you do care, although it be ever so little. The real love of any man must have meaning to the memory of the one woman."

"And it has — will ever have to me."

There was an impulsiveness to these words which sent my heart throbbing.

"How — how could I be indifferent?" she went on, almost indignantly. "I am young, scarcely more than a girl, and this is all new to me; I hardly comprehend the meaning of it. But — but I cannot forget. No tale of romance could be stranger than the way in which we have been thrown together. You are a Yankee, an enemy to all I have been taught to revere, in warfare against my people, your first act a grievous wrong against myself, and — and yet I can't hate you. I've tried, but I can't! Oh, it is the strangest thing! I even believe I dread to have you go away, and yet you must, and I wish you to."

"Then I shall go, but you tempt me strongly."

"Tempt you? — how? — to what?"

"Tempt me to urge that the war will some time be over; tempt me to hope I may be welcome when that time comes."

"Have I said that? — have I said anything like that?"

"No; only that you are not indifferent; that you do care a little. It is not your words, but your eyes, which encourage me."

"My eyes!" They dropped an instant, then opened wide, gazing into my own.

"Yes; I cannot explain, yet they seem to say I shall be welcome, even while your lips deny." I caught her clasped hands in mine, and separated them. "Which tell the truth?"

She made no effort to draw away from me, but laughed lightly.

"Neither, would be the safer guess," she responded, "for both are masks. You cannot understand me, Lieutenant King, and it is useless to try. I do not even understand myself. I am a continual contradiction; I don't in the least want to like you, but I do; I know I wish you to go away, and — and yet it is not so easy. You interest me; perhaps that is why I have such opposite moods. But really you must not take me too seriously either from the eyes or the lips. I do not promise that either tell all the truth."

"Where, then, can I discover the truth?"

"I am sure I do not know," innocently. "Would you expect to in a woman?"

"Yes, in a true woman. But you puzzle me. What are you? — a flirt?"

"Indeed no!"

"A coquette?"

"Certainly not, Lieutenant King."

"Then what?"

She was breathing heavily, her hands still clasped tightly in mine, her cheeks flushed.

"Only a Rebel," she said softly, "an uncompromising Rebel."

"This would seem to imply that politics alone interfere."

"The spirit of rebellion might cover much more; yet surely that is enough to make anything further between us impossible."

"But there will be an end to this present conflict. One side or the other must win."

"I — I wish you would release my hands, Lieutenant King," she said, her lips trembling. "However this war terminates it can make no difference in our personal relations." Her face lit up with a quick smile, as she took a step backward. "I am an uncompromising Rebel, you see; one of the no-surrender kind."

I stood erect, gazing at her, unable to find any words for further argument, and thoroughly bewildered as to her real feeling toward me. I could not determine whether the girl mocked, or spoke in sincerity, and could discover nothing in the expression of her face to yield me a clue. Perhaps she was better able to decipher my state of mind, for she said gravely:

"I wish you to go away before either Colonel Donald or Lieutenant Dunn returns. The latter will certainly attempt to hold you prisoner, and it will be better for the former not to be any further involved in this matter. If you depart now, I alone am responsible for the escape, and I am perfectly willing to assume the blame. You will find a horse waiting you in front of the house."

"But do I leave you alone here?" I questioned, recalling the tragedies of the past few nights.

"There is a guard of five men about the place, so you need have no fear as to my safety. The others will doubtless return before nightfall."

There was certainly nothing of compromise in either words or manner. She evidently did not intend I should go away with any lingering doubt in my mind as to her determination.

"This, then, is to be good-bye?" I asked, unable to refrain from one last effort.

"Yes, Lieutenant King. It shall be a friendly parting, but good-bye nevertheless."

She held out her hand, and I took it, almost unconscious of the action, my eyes looking into hers.

"You will go? You will not make this any harder for me?" she asked, a note of appeal in the soft voice.

"Yes, I will go."

I lifted the hand to my lips, and she drew back with flushed cheeks, holding the door ajar, to glance back at me.

"I thank you — good-bye."

She was gone, and, feeling the reaction of weakness, I dropped back again into the chair, resting my head upon one hand.

CHAPTER XXVII

AGAIN THE WOMAN

IT seemed to me that door, now tightly closed, typified everything, and I remained staring at it, sitting motionless, with hand shading my eyes. It was all over, then — all over. There might have been friendship between us, but not love. I had come within the radius of her life too late for that. I could not comprehend how I had ever hoped it might be otherwise. Surely no act or word of hers had been meant to give me encouragement. Yet there was something in the depths of those frank eyes which had led me on, which had aroused confidence, and awakened my dream. Even now, staring at that tightly closed door, I could not entirely convince myself all was over between us. That parting contained a message of the eyes which would not permit me to think of her as being indifferent, or devoid of feeling. There was a touch of mystery about the girl which continued to tantalize and puzzle me. Even as the memory of her glance caused hope to revive, I called myself a fool for yielding to it. Surely her decision was definite enough, and she had clearly meant this was to end all. By seeking her again I would only torture us both to no purpose. It would be far better to accept her refusal, and depart as speedily as possible. Indeed, as a

gentleman, nothing else remained for me to do. Whatever her unguarded eyes may have seemed to reveal, undoubtedly it was no more than kindness, upon which I had no right to presume. Her heart belonged to another; she had definitely told me so, and this knowledge alone was sufficient to decide my action. I could no longer trouble her and retain my self-respect.

I got up slowly, feeling greater weakness than I had been aware of during the excitement of our interview, and advanced to where I could survey myself in the mirror. Evidently one of my nurses had bathed my face, but my uniform jacket was sadly torn, and my appearance was not improved by the cloth bound across my forehead. I removed this, disclosing a jagged cut at the edge of the hair, which had ceased to bleed, however, and I left it uncovered, replacing my hat so that the wound was scarcely visible. A bottle of brandy, half filled, stood on the dresser, and I took a swallow, the fiery stuff sending new life through my veins. The experience of the past few hours had marked me in various ways: I looked older, my eyes heavy from lack of sleep, my face white from loss of blood, my whole appearance that of a man tired and worn out by worry and strenuous exertion. I stood staring at the reflected face, dimly aware that all the appearance of boyhood had gone out of it, realizing that it was indeed my own, yet scarcely recognizing the changed features. It seemed impossible that peril and exertion could have left such plain outward manifestations.

I was still gazing into the glass fascinated by its reve-

lation, when, it seemed to me, the door leading into the hallway opened slightly. I could perceive the movement within the mirror, although it was noiseless, and so stealthy that I should have missed it altogether had my gaze not been concentrated upon the exact spot. Inch by inch the door opened, until sufficiently wide to permit the thrusting forward of a face. Gazing into the mirror I never moved, waiting motionless to discover who this silent visitor might be. My hands gripped the dresser, every nerve throbbing, as I saw that countenance — the haggard, ghostly lineaments of the mad woman. Our eyes met in the glass, met as if fascinated, each standing rigid from surprise, too greatly startled to cry out. There was no doubt as to the insanity in those wild orbs staring at me, and, for the instant, I could not escape their power. They seemed to hold me as the snake does the bird. Then my fingers gripped hard on the dresser, and I swung around, desperately resolved to make the creature captive. With my first hostile move the door clicked shut, and, before I could touch the latch, my foot caught the edge of a rug, and I fell to my knees.

The delay was merely that of an instant, and then I had flung the door wide open, and was in the hallway. A glance told me that this was the second story, but the insane woman had disappeared as completely as if dissolved in air. I could see from end to end of that hall, past the rail of the staircase, back to the fire screen hiding the secret passage, but I was there alone. The screen was in its place, and every door, so far as I could see, closed. Where had that woman vanished so quickly?

It would have been impossible for her to traverse the length of that hall, and operate the tunnel entrance in so brief space of time. Could she have gone down the stairs? I sprang to the railing, and glanced below; a guard, fully armed, stood just within the front door, leaning on his rifle. No one could pass that way unobserved; then she must be hiding within one of the rooms.

So certain was I of this that I took time to the search, opening door after door, and surveying each interior thus revealed with a carefulness which convinced me they were absolutely empty. I found not a single locked door, or anything arousing my suspicion. Two rooms were in slight disorder, as if lately occupied, but nowhere did I discover the slightest trace of the woman sought. Thoroughly puzzled I came out of the last room, that in which the Irish lad and I had been imprisoned, and, scarcely knowing why, paused at the head of the stairs, to glance down once again at the sentry stationed below. He was apparently a young fellow, roughly dressed in butternut, a wide brimmed and rather disreputable hat shading his face. He lifted his eyes to the stairs, and I nearly cried out in startled amazement — as I lived, it was O'Brien! I would have believed it merely a strange resemblance had not the fellow impudently grinned up at me, making use of a peculiar gesture, which left no doubt of his identity. O'Brien, in pretence of Confederate uniform, acting as sentinel here as one of Donald's guerillas! What was the game? What had it to do with my escape? — with the mystery of this house? And Jean? — did she

know? Could she have passed and repassed without noticing the boy and recognizing him? These and a dozen other puzzling inquiries came leaping to my brain to add to my bewilderment. Even as I stared, almost expecting the fellow to disappear before my very eyes, I saw him step back, and peer cautiously first into the parlor and then into the library. Apparently convinced that no one was near enough to observe his movements, he ran swiftly up the stairs, still grasping his rifle. Halfway up he paused, his eyes keeping a sharp lookout below.

"For the Lord's sake, sor," he whispered hoarsely, "av ye're goin' to skip, now 's the toime, before the Sergeant gits here wid my relief."

"What do you mean? Have you been stationed there to let me slip through?"

"Sure, that 's the programme. It 's the girl that fixed it all up, an' a damn smart one she is, sor."

"Not Miss Denslow?"

"An' who the divil else would it be? Sure she picked me out from the whole bunch for the job, an' niver cracked a smoile, but them pretty oies of hers was dancin'. Just now whin she came down she give me the wink, an' said I was to pass ye out, an' niver say nothin'."

"But what are you doing here? What 's the meaning of this masquerade?"

The fellow grinned, bringing his hand to a salute.

"I'm Private O'Brien, sor, of the Confed army, but damn av I know what part. I wus lift behind whin me fellow-sojers departed after the late fracas. Sometimes I tell thim I belonged to Dodd's squad, sometoimes to

Theilen's, an' thin agin I came over here wid Lieutenant Dunn. Divil a bit o' difference it makes so I belong to some other outfit than the fellow I'm talkin' to. It 's an illigant liar I am, begorra, an' that 's how I hold the job."

"Yes, but how do you come here? What are you up to?"

"Up to gittin' away as soon as the noight comes, sor," in a whisper. "Sure thim divils shot the horse undher me, an' I came down in a bit of bush, so shook up I did n't know me own name for an hour. Thin there was no gittin' away, an' I lay there studyin' it all out, an' watchin' thim Rebs lavin'. The way they had fixed me, I could n't see how I was iver goin' to git shut of thim except by bein' a Reb myself for a whoile. So I shtole a coat — this beauty I've got on, sor — an' a hat; an', afther the most of thim had marched away, I came out an' reported to the Sergeant. He talked to me loike hell, sor, till the girl took me part, an' since thin he 's bin civil enough."

"Miss Denslow took your part?" I questioned in surprise. "What did she say?"

The Irish eyes twinkled merrily.

"Bedad, she said she knew me; that I was wan of Liftenant Dunn's cavalrymen."

"She said that?"

"Begorra she did, sor, an' I stood lookin' at her purty face wid me mouth open. It was a beautiful loi, sor, an' she niver cracked a smoile while she was givin' it to him. She'd a' fooled a betther man than that sergeant

wid the honest way of her, an' thim eyes a-lookin' sthraight at him. They're great divils, thim girls."

"But why did she do this? What object could she have had?"

He rubbed his sleeve across his mouth, leaning over the railing to where he could look the full length of the hall; then he straightened up, his face solemn as a preacher's.

"Begorra, at first I thought it was me manly beauty that did it. Damned av I did n't, sor, she was that foine to me, a-smoilin' beautiful, wid her broight oies lookin' sthraight into moine. The Sergeant an' meself both got it in the neck. But afther a whoile I woke up from me dhrame; but sure an' it was sweet whoile it lasted."

"What is all this you're talking about, O'Brien?"

"About yourself, sor. Begorra, you was the wan the loidy was thinkin' about all the toime. Ivery wan of thim smoiles was on account of you. Divil a bit did the loikes of her care for aither the Sergeant or meself, so she got you out of here safe. Bedad, she about the same as tould me so wid her own rosy lips not tin minutes ago."

The knowledge of Jean's interest in me quickened my pulses, but I had no inclination to discuss such a matter with O'Brien, or to question him as to what she may have said in excitement. Indeed, at that moment I felt more anxiety to solve the haunting mystery of the house than to escape. I was afraid to depart leaving that insane, murderous woman at large.

"Did she tell you to pass me?"

"She did, sor, an' there 's two horses outside, an' a clear field for the both of us."

"Well, O'Brien, I am not going," and my voice had the tone of determination. "Not now, at least; not until I can leave things in better shape here. I have n't any right to interfere with your escape, my boy, but I am going to clear up the mystery of this place before I leave these women unguarded. I have just seen that crazy woman again."

"Ye have?"

"Yes; she opened the door of the front chamber. I saw her face clearly in the mirror, but I tripped and fell, and she got away. God knows where she went, for I've hunted every room on this floor, and she could n't have come down these stairs without your seeing her."

"The tunnel, sor."

"I've thought of that, but she had no time to reach there before I was in the hall. There may be some other way leading into it, of course, which we have not yet discovered, but I am not going to run away leaving her here to commit more murders. What about you?"

"Sure I'm wid ye, sor."

"Then go back there and serve your guard. You can help me more in that way than any other just now. Keep Miss Denslow down below, if possible, and don't take your eyes off these stairs. When is your relief?"

"An hour yit, sor."

"Good: that will give me plenty of time. Get back to your post."

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE MAN IN THE TUNNEL

I HAD an hour, then, in which to attempt the solving of this mystery, and still retain opportunity for escape. I could rely upon O'Brien to guard carefully the lower hall and prevent interruption, while I thoroughly investigated the upper portion of the house, and again explored the tunnel. Indeed the first portion of this task was already accomplished, for I could recall no nook or cranny which I had not examined. Possibly the woman might have slipped past me in the hall while I was exploring the rooms, but I had left the doors open, and had watched so closely as to make this highly improbable. To my mind there remained only the underground passage to search, and I purposed making my search thorough in every particular. I went back to the front chamber, seeking my revolver, but found no trace of it, and was compelled to proceed unarmed. A bit uneasy at being weaponless I took the precaution of glancing again into each room, to reassure myself of the emptiness of all, before plunging into the tunnel.

The fire-screen moved easily, and I propped it back with a chair, so it could not be closed upon me without human aid, and lit the lantern, which had apparently remained undisturbed since our last trip that way. The

shaft leading down was black and silent, and I held the yellow flame higher to examine the iron bars, arranged ladder-like along the back wall. I had scarcely thought of this seriously before, but now I observed there were three of these steps, and that the third was a wide strip which extended along the side hall. This rather peculiar arrangement aroused my curiosity, and, slinging the lantern to my belt, I clambered up, discovering a somewhat similar bar at the top of the shaft, which gave me a hand-hold, thus enabling me to walk the lower strip. A single step revealed the deception of the appearance from below. Before me was painted canvas, not rock, and the framework to which it was nailed yielded instantly to my grasp. The lantern revealed nothing but a bare narrow closet, with a door to the right. I clambered in, and opened the latter, looking out into one of those unoccupied rooms which I had previously examined. It was plain enough now how the woman had disappeared so suddenly — she had slipped into this chamber, and, by way of the closet, found entrance to the tunnel. And here must be where she had hidden before.

The discovery put me in better humor, for now much of the mystery was solved, and I could proceed with more confidence. Without doubt she was in the tunnel, or had passed through and escaped to the open air. I must make certain of this, and then block the passage so that her return that way would be impossible. I went back through the hall, and crawled into the shaft once more by way of the fire-screen, the lantern still dangling at my waist as I scrambled recklessly down the ladder.

The venture did not seem to me a dangerous one; to be sure the woman carried a knife while I was unarmed, yet she could not approach unobserved while I bore the lantern, and my strength would easily overcome her weapon. Besides, she would never attempt an attack in that straight tunnel which afforded no opportunity for surprise. Always she had struck her death blows in the dark, and I felt no fear of her so long as that yellow flame flickered in advance along the stone walls.

Once safely below I removed the lantern from my belt and held it out before me, so as to throw its meagre rays as far as possible, and stepped forward into the gloomy passage. There was nothing to awaken alarm, the silence was profound, no sense of movement anywhere. So complete was my feeling of security that I even came to a pause, exploring my jacket pocket for pipe and tobacco, experiencing a desire to smoke. I found these, and was searching for a match, when something seemed to whiz out of the blackness, crashed against the glass of the lantern, instantly whiffing out the yellow flame. I dropped the pipe, reeling back against the wall, blinded by the intense darkness, and scarcely comprehending what had occurred. I could not even tell where the missile had come from; it was not a bullet for there was no report, yet surely the woman could never have thrown a stone with so precise an aim. This flashed over me instantly, for I was given no time for thought; something rushed at me through the blackness, and we grappled each other in mad, desperate struggle, yet the

numbing sense of fear left me, as I realized that my adversary was a man.

He was a man, yet he fought with all the ferocity of a beast. It was God's mercy that I caught his wrist in my grip and forced a knife from his uplifted hand. I heard it clatter to the floor, even as I struck him with the lantern. Then it was naked hands, the fellow clawing wildly for my throat, while I drove my fist viciously into his face. I had an advantage in this, even in that darkness, for I knew how to handle my arms, and had him sufficiently located to make under-cuts efficient. I landed twice, the second blow sending him staggering back against the wall; but what he lacked in science he made up in savagery, and in rough bar-room fighting, and he came back, clawing at me in the darkness, and kicking viciously at my body. But for the clutch of his fingers on my jacket collar, screwing it tight in an effort at throttling, I would not have known exactly where to strike. But with this as guide I kept my left busy and felt flesh with my knuckles, driving in short-arm jabs until I had him forced to the wall, his head pounding the stones every time I hit him. Had it been daylight, had I been able to see, I would have known I had the fellow whipped, but in that hole, fearing treachery, or the use of some weapon, I kept remorselessly at him, until he sank at my feet, begging for mercy under punishment. Even then I kept my grip upon him with one hand, while the other groped about for the lantern. I found it, at last, the glass globe shattered, and managed

to ignite the wick, the flickering flame barely dispelling the darkness for a dozen feet. But it revealed the face of my opponent, and I loosened my grip, staring at him in amazement. His whiskers were torn in the struggle, his face blood-stained, but I could not doubt his identity — Daniels the mountaineer.

What did this mean? It was the feud, then, back of all these murders. The woman had disappeared — vanished as mysteriously as she had come; but here was this man creeping into the house through the tunnel, knife in hand, urged by the same spirit of hatred, the same insanity of revenge. My heart hardened against him; pitiful object though he was, I felt no sympathy, no desire to aid. I could have trampled on him as upon a snake. Even as he recognized me, he read the truth in my eyes, and shrank back against the rock wall, his arms uplifted as if for protection.

"Was it you, Leftenant? By God, I did n't know."

"It makes no difference what you knew," I returned hotly. "You made no effort to find out; you tried murder, and there has been too much of that done here already."

"What is it you mean? — murder, here?"

"Yes, and I have no doubt you know more about it than I do; within forty-eight hours three men have been assassinated here in the dark — stricken down by the knife, and the fourth barely escaped with a serious wound."

He stared up at me, his head against the wall, as if scarcely comprehending.

"Three killed? Who were they?"

"A Confederate Lieutenant, a private of the Third Ohio Cavalry, and Judge Dunn. The man injured but not killed was Jem Donald."

It seemed to me a new light almost of exultation leaped into the gray eyes, but it vanished instantly.

"My God!" he exclaimed incredulously, "Who did it?"

I caught his wrist, staring straight down into his face.

"That is what I want you to tell me, Daniels," I said sternly, "and I want it straight. That feud of yours is at the bottom of this thing. The killing of the two soldiers was accidental; whoever did the dastardly deed was after Dunn and Donald. Now I believe you know the whole story; your being here, your attack on me, is enough to convince me of that, and I am going to have the truth out of you, if I have to choke it out."

"As God is my witness, Leftenant, I know nothing. I did n't even know of the murders until you told me."

"What were you doing in this tunnel? Why did you attack me?"

He sat up, wiping the blood from his face with a red handkerchief, and thrusting one hand through his grizzled hair. He acted like one bewildered, unable to think clearly.

"I can't tell yer that, not just yet anyhow, but I never came yere to hurt any one so long as they let me alone. That 's ther truth, sir. I've known of this passage a long while, and I've got reason enough to feel hard against ther ol' Judge, as well as Jem Donald, but

I've fought 'em fair; that is, fair accordin' ter ther way we fight sich things out in ther mountings. I ain't no murderer, an' I don't come creepin' long in ther dark ter knife anybody. I went fer yer, but yer hed me trapped yere in this hole, an' I s'posed yer was one o' thet outfit, an' thar was n't nothin' fer me to do but make a fight fer it. But I swear, sir, I never come in yere lookin' fer trouble."

The evident earnestness of the man brought me a certain measure of faith. Yet I could not entirely free him from suspicion.

"Where were you yesterday and last night?"

"Scoutin' Lost Crick," he answered promptly enough. "Las' night I took a notion to look up my own people."

I said nothing, and he went on.

"They're purty well cleaned out, Leftenant — killed an' skipped. Some of 'em are hidin' out in ther mountings an' some hev gone inter ther army. Dern if I ain't 'bout all thet 's left fit ter keep matters bilin'. 'Twixt ther war an' hard luck, thet Donald crowd has just 'bout cleaned us up. Burnt my cabin, too." He got up upon his feet, his gray eyes burning like two coals of fire. "But, by God, sir, I'm yere ter be reckon'd with yit, an' ol' Bill Daniels has got a mighty big score ter wipe out. Maybe I never kin do it, but I'll git Jem Donald if I hev ter ketch him in hell."

The utterly unrestrained savagery of the man fascinated me. The feud spirit clutched him, and, as he dwelt on the wrongs done, he had no thought, no concep-

tion, other than revenge. He would have tortured his victim with all the relentless cruelty of an Indian. Hate held full possession of all the man's faculties — he could die happy taking Donald with him.

"You say they have destroyed your home?"

"Burned it ter ther ground, Leftenant — not a stick left: not even a hawg rootin' 'round."

I laid my hand on the man's shoulder, feeling a wave of sympathy. Perhaps he had been wronged, outraged; perhaps I should be as great a savage under the same provocation.

"Daniels," I urged earnestly, "I understand how you feel, but I know Donald, and I cannot believe him guilty of such an act. No doubt he has fought you in this feud of your fathers', but I guess he has always fought fair after the mountain fashion. I don't believe he is the kind of a man to go out there and destroy your home in that manner. Young Dunn might do it, for he is just cowardly enough, but not Jem Donald. He 's a man, and fights like a man. I believe you are wrong. Some of his guerillas may have done it, but never by his order — I'd stake my life on that. I'm your commanding officer, and you have some confidence in me, have n't you? You believe I'm all right, and that I want you to have a square deal? Well now, play this out like a man, and stop being a savage. Come with me to Jem Donald, and let 's find out the truth. Will you do that, Daniels?" And I held out my hand.

He stared at me in a moment's silence, apparently un-

able to find expression; then mouth and eyes hardened.

"I reckon maybe yer mean well," he said, "but yer don't understand."

"What don't I understand?"

"This yere affair. Why, Leftenant, we was both born ter a blood feud. Ye can't ever stop that till ther one or ther other is dead. Suppose I did go ter him, he'd shoot me down afore I could speak a word. Why not? By God, if he come ter me I'd do ther same. Besides, thet ain't all: I've hed houses burned afore," his voice choked, "but somethin' 's happened ter my wife an' the kids; I can't find hide ner hair of 'em."

"Surely you do not think they have been injured? — done away with?"

"It wouldn n't be ther first time sich a thing was done. Ther women fight as well as ther men in these mountings."

"Yes," I assented, remembering, "I have reason to believe it was a woman who committed the murders in this house."

CHAPTER XXIX

THE TESTIMONY OF A WITNESS

I COULD hardly see the expression of the man's face in the miserable light of that smoking lantern when he leaped forward gripping me by the shoulder so fiercely that for the instant I thought it an attack. His voice alone reassured me.

"A woman!" he cried. "Are you sure? — did you see her?"

"Yes," I answered, beginning to understand his suspicion. "I saw her twice — it was the haggard face of an insane woman, with gray hair, and the wildest eyes imaginable. I was trailing her just now through this tunnel."

"She escaped this way? You are sure she went this way?"

"No, Daniels, not sure," and I began to experience compassion for him. "I last saw her face a few minutes ago in the front chamber up-stairs. Before I could get outside she had disappeared, and I searched the entire second floor without finding any trace. She could leave the house in no other way except along this passage, as the lower hall is under guard. What is it you suspect? — that it may be your wife? Did she know of this entrance?"

"Yes," he almost sobbed, his head lowered, "she knew. I heard of it from one of ther workmen, and talked of it with her, but I can't believe it of Maria; I can't believe it. If she has ever done such an act she is insane." He stared about into the darkness, apparently dazed. "Who else saw her? Did any one else see her?"

"Only Jean Denslow."

"She saw her, and said nothing? — there was no recognition?"

"There was not a word said, Daniels. Miss Denslow appeared horrified at the face, but I am sure there was no recognition."

He buried his face in his hands, swaying on his feet like a drunken man, and I could hear his heavy breathing. I had never before supposed the man capable of such feeling, and his total surrender touched me deeply. Perhaps here and now was the opportunity to end this century feud, to bring the warring factions to some mutual understanding.

"See here, Daniels," and I grasped him by the arm, compelling him to lift his face to the light. "I am not ready to think this was the work of your wife. But there ought to be some way to settle it. Would Jean Denslow know her?"

"Yes."

"Then come with me to Jean Denslow. You are surely not afraid to meet her, and she will tell the truth."

"But you say ther house is under guard."

"True; but the soldiers don't know you. Miss Dens-

low is here alone; both Donald and Calvert Dunn are absent. I pledge you my word no harm shall befall you if you will go with me at once. If this strange woman is your wife Jean Denslow will know it. If not, then we must all unite to find out who she is. No matter what bitterness of hatred this feud has put in your heart, you don't want these cowardly murders charged against you. You are a fighting man, Daniels; now meet this thing square."

I could read the struggle in his face, yet I must have spoken the right words, for he managed to say at last:

"I'll go to her with yer, Leftenant, I'll go; but I never thought I'd ever go ter one o' thet breed on no mission o' peace, an' blame me if I would to nary one but her. I allers reckoned she was squar, an' I ain't got no fight with her, but thar'll be hell ter pay if I run up agin any o' ther rest o' 'em. Yer'll bear thet in mind, sir."

"All right, Daniels," I responded, glad to get this much consideration out of him. "I am risking trouble, as well as you. The fact is I am practically a prisoner, but the girl has opened a way for my escape during the absence of the others. If they arrive before I get away, my game is up. In such case we shall have to stand together." He was gazing down the black passage. "Come on, there is no use hunting in that direction. You came from there, and if the woman escaped through this tunnel she is beyond reach now. Will you go with me to Miss Denslow? Give me your hand on it."

He was not yet satisfied, but the desire to find his wife,

to learn the truth, was strong enough to overcome even the feud spirit, and, after a moment's hesitation, I felt the grip of his fingers. An instant I stared into the cool gray of his eyes in uncertainty; then turned and retraced my steps along the passage. The way was clear, the fire-screen standing open as I had left it, and the two of us crept out into the deserted hall, seeing no one. I peered cautiously down the stairs, finding O'Brien still on guard at the door. In a moment he glanced upward, saw me, and stepped instantly back to where he could take a quick survey of his surroundings. Apparently satisfied that he was alone, he came to the foot of the stairs, and asked in a stage whisper,—

"Did ye git her, sor?"

"No, not yet, but I need to speak with Miss Denslow. Do you know where she is?"

"She wint insoide the loibrary, sor, an' that 's the last I've seen of her."

"Get word to her to come to the front room up-stairs, but don't let any one else hear you."

I steered Daniels into the apartment designated, leaving the door open. The man seemed to have lost his nerve, from the way his hand trembled, although his eyes retained their deadly glint, and I knew he would prove dangerous enough if occasion warranted. I made him sit down in the nearest chair, and took my own position between him and the open door. I was not armed, and I doubted if he was any better fixed, except for the knife which he had picked up from the floor of the tunnel. But I no longer felt any fear of a personal contest with the

fellow; tough and sinewy as he was, my knowledge of boxing made me more than his match, and I was determined that if any trouble started I should strike the first blow.

We may have been there ten minutes, our eyes on the door, myself standing rigid and expectant, but Daniels fidgeting nervously and evidently half suspicious that he was being made the victim of some trick. Twice he half arose to his feet, an oath on his lips, yet I succeeded in quieting him, although he sat on the very edge of the chair, ready to spring at the slightest alarm. I could not wonder at his trepidation under the circumstances, for he was in the home of hereditary foes, with only my word as assurance of safety. I heard the soft pressure of feet on the stairs, and then the swish of a dress in the hall. Daniels was on his feet instantly, crouching like a wild animal, but I held him back with a grip upon his arm.

"Stay where you are," I whispered sternly, "it is only the girl coming."

For the first second she appeared to perceive me only, her eyes searching my face in one quick, questioning glance; then she saw Daniels, and she reeled back against the side of the door, flinging out her hands, the expression of her face picturing startled recognition.

"You!" she burst forth, before I could speak,—"Lieutenant King, what is this man doing here?"

I caught the extended hand, drew her within the room, and closed the door. She seemed to yield to me without effort at resistance, but still stared into Daniels's face

with inexpressible horror. Never before had I realized the depth of dread and hatred engendered by this death war. To her mind this man was a fiend, a murderer, a devil incarnate, from whom she shrank in unutterable horror. But I held her close to me, determined she should remain and listen, confident her woman's heart would respond to the human plea.

"Miss Denslow, wait," I urged eagerly, "wait and listen to my explanation. Daniels is not here to do injury. No doubt you have been taught to consider him as a deadly enemy, cruel and vindictive, but he is only a man who has been driven to acts of violence by the conditions of birth. He possesses all the feelings natural to humanity, and is here now in peace. Will you listen to me? Will you hear the story?"

She clung to me closely, still shrinking back from him, her eyes leaving his face to study mine, and as instantly softening in expression. That she trusted me was apparent, and my heart leaped to the knowledge with a fresh courage.

"Yes," slowly, almost reluctantly. "I will listen, but — but make him stand where he is."

"He shall not move until I am done, Miss Jean, and I can explain all in few words. You had scarcely left me alone, when this door was pushed open and I saw, reflected in the mirror there, the awful face of that woman who seems to haunt this house. I sprang toward her, but tripped and fell, so that when I reached the hall she had vanished. I searched every room on the floor vainly. Although my own escape depended on my getting away

at once, I did not dare leave you comparatively alone here with that creature at large. I found O'Brien on guard below, and set forth myself to explore the tunnel once more. Half way through I met Daniels. It does n't make any difference what happened between us down there, nor how he came to be there; but I told him about this woman, that you, as well as I, had seen her, and he wanted to ask you something. Will you answer him?"

She looked at the man, wetting her lips, her eyes opened wide in bewilderment.

"Yes," she said, "I will answer."

Daniels was trembling like a leaf. I could see his hands shake, and he spoke with difficulty.

"Wal, Miss," he said, forcing his words out, "I reckon yer don't think none too much o' me, an' I 'spect I hev done some pretty blame mean things, but they were n't a darn bit meaner than what 's been done ter me. When I went off ter ther war I hed a cabin up on Lost Crick, whar I thought it was safe, an' I left a wife an' three kids thar awaitin' my comin' back. Las' night I got a chance ter ride thet way, an' I found some hell-hounds hed burnt ther cabin, an' either murdered ther woman an' her kids, or else drove 'em inter ther hills. I could n't git no trace o' them high er low, an' I nat'rally laid it up agin your people. Now, Miss, maybe I'm tough, but I'm man enough ter care a heap fer my wife an' ther kids jist ther same, an' I started out ter find what hed become o' them. Thet 's what fetched me yere, an' I come fightin' mad. I reckon yer know what we-uns are in ther

mountings, an' how hard we hate. Wal, I never hated no worse than I do now; an' if half I'm feared of is true, thar 's sure goin' ter be hell 'round yere whin I do turn loose."

She stood staring at him with white face and parted lips, apparently only partially understanding the man's broken speech, yet, with womanly instinct, grasping the one essential fact — the strange disappearance of his wife and children.

"Mr. Daniels," she broke in impulsively. "I have been taught to fear you, but I am not afraid now," and she looked quickly from his face into mine. "You seem to think that we — that Jem Donald — has burnt your cabin, driven your family out; but it is not so; I know it is not so. I — I am just as sorry as any one to hear this; indeed I am, for I have met your wife; she — she was kind to me once, years ago."

The man choked, much of the sternness gone from his haggard face.

"Yes, she told me 'bout thet, an' it was because you'd know her thet I kim yere ter question yer. Ther Leftenant says you saw ther woman who has been murderin' in this house. If yer did, I want yer ter tell me ther truth — was it Maria?"

The girl's hands went to her throat, as if the unexpected inquiry had taken her breath, and for the moment she remained mute, her eyes on his, her slender form trembling. Then she conquered herself with an effort.

"Yes, I — I saw the face!" she answered, shuddering; the very memory seemed painful; "an awful face, scarcely

human; it was white and haggard, with wild black eyes, and wisps of gray hair dangling on either side. It seemed to me like a vision of hate, and I cannot banish the recollection from my mind. But — but I never saw that face before — never; as God hears me, it was not your wife."

A long moment the mountaineer looked at her, apparently seeking the truth in the girl's eyes; then he collapsed into the chair, shuddering as he buried his face in his hands.

CHAPTER XXX

DANIELS AND DONALD MEET

I COULD scarcely realize the truth — that this grim mountaineer, savage in cruel instinct, utterly devoid of human tenderness, responsive only to the demands of the blood feud, was yet at heart a real man, his heart wrung by sorrow, and weak as a child in suffering. The strain upon him had been too great, and with the reaction, he had broken down, his gaunt form shaken by sobs, his face hidden between his hands. Even before I grasped the full meaning of this unexpected weakness, the girl understood, and the woman responded. All fear, dislike, hesitancy vanished, and she stepped past me to rest her hand on his shoulder.

"I am so glad I can assure you of this, Mr. Daniels," she said softly. "I — I never saw your wife except that once; but she was kind to me when I needed kindness, and I have never felt the same bitterness since. Surely between you and me there is no quarrel. I would rather help than injure you. Will you not take my hand?"

The man raised his head, staring at her in astonishment. He had expected bitterness, reviling, but not this, and for the moment the honesty of her purpose failed to impress him.

"Yer mean, Miss, we are ter be friends?"

"Certainly; why should we remain enemies?"

His lips trembled under the beard, his eyes full of bewilderment.

"I — I don't understand," he stammered. "Ther feud; ther years of fightin'; don't yer suppose I know who yer be?"

"Yes, of course, you know," her slender form straightening, but her hand still outstretched. "Yet if I can forget and forgive, so can you. No one of us can tell how this feud started. For generations our families have fought without knowing what they were fighting for. Both sides in this senseless quarrel have killed, burned, and destroyed. We have been born to an inheritance of hate. For one, I am sick and tired of it all; I am ashamed of my part in it. I want to act and feel like a woman, not a fiend. I don't hate you, Bill Daniels; I don't hate your wife or your children; I would rather do you good than evil. Can't you understand that? Can't you forget who I am, and accept my hand in the same spirit with which I offer it?"

As God is my witness, there were actually tears shining in the man's cold gray eyes, but I thought he would never move, never answer. He appeared paralyzed, stricken motionless and speechless. Then his hand, which had been convulsively gripping the arm of the chair, seemed to steal forth without volition, touched hers and clung to it in pitiful uncertainty. I could hear the beating of my own heart, the heavy, rapid breathing of both the others; and suddenly the girl sank to her knees, her head bowed on the arm of the chair, her

fingers yet clasping the man's nerveless hand. She may have prayed in the silence — I do not know. There was no movement, no sound, Daniels staring at the bowed head like one in a dream. Then she lifted her face, and looked at him.

"I am glad you came," she said simply, her voice trembling slightly. "I — I have wanted to talk with you alone, for three years — ever since I began to be a woman. But I have been afraid of you; ever since I was a child I have been taught that, and it is hard to break away." Her lips smiled. "But I am not afraid any more; I don't believe you are a bad man; you love your wife and children. You are only like the rest of us — like Colonel Donald, like Judge Dunn — you were born into this feud, and have fought and hated because you knew nothing else. Is n't that so?"

"I — I suppose it is, Miss," the acknowledgment barely audible even in that silence. "I never remember back ter whar I felt diff'rent."

"I cannot blame you, yet it is an awful thing for neighbors to be hereditary enemies, to hunt and kill one another. It seemed natural enough to me once — before I went North to school, and came into a different environment; but now it is a savage horror. I want you to see this as I do; you have to think of me as a friend; I want you to feel the same toward my friends."

"Who do yer mean, Miss?"

"Those you have fought all your life — Jem Donald —"

"Not in a thousan' years!" he interrupted hotly,

dropping her hand as if it were a coal of fire, and raising his gaunt form from the chair. "Ye're a woman, an' somehow yer came at me jist right; but it 's goin' ter take fightin', an' plenty of it, afore Jem Donald an' me settle our trouble. Thar 's too many dead folks an' burned houses atween us fer any sich foolishness."

"I know there are," her voice and face exhibiting earnestness. "But, Daniels, this has not all been one-sided, this hundred years of feud over some silly quarrel. You have killed and burned, as well as those on our side. The one party has suffered almost equally with the other. And what has either gained?"

He stood looking at her, his deep-set eyes gloomy, defiant, stubborn. He could see and feel but one fact, and her appeal never really reached him.

"Maybe if all thet was true I might be soft 'nough ter be led by ye, Miss," he said, at last, gravely. "But yer've took a pore time fer ter plead peace with Bill Daniels. Maybe ef things was comin' my way I'd see it diff'rent, see it ther way you-uns do; but I ain't ther sort ter knuckle down 'cause I'm gittin' ther worst of it. Thet 's whin I fight like hell."

"What is it you mean?"

"Oh, I reckon you-all know well enough. Ye've got us about wiped out; what was left afore ther war has been finished by these yere damn guerillas Jem Donald has turned loose in ther hills. I come back yere, an' everywhar I go it 's a dead Daniels; an' yer ask me ter be peaceful!" He straightened up, his eyes hard. "I tell ye, I want my wife an' kids first. I ain't got

nuthin' special agin you, Miss Jean. I reckon 'tain't your fault ye're what yer are; but fer Jem Donald, an' thet young calf of a Dunn, I'm layin' till I either git 'em, er they git me."

"But, Daniels, Jem Donald never destroyed your home; never drove away your wife or children. He would help you hunt them; I know he would."

The face of the old mountaineer had hardened into its usual expression of grimness, and I thought he already felt ashamed of his slight display of feeling.

"The hell he would! I reckon you an' I don't know ther same Donald."

"No, I don't think we do. I ask you to give the one I know a trial."

He shook his head stubbornly. "It 's no use; soft words won't never settle our score." His eyes shifted from her face to mine. "Leftenant, I'm a-goin' ter git out o' yere; I feel like I was caught in a trap."

"Do you mean to insinuate that we are treating you unfairly?" I asked hotly.

"No; 't ain't you ner ther gal. You two are square 'nough. But this yere is ol' Jedge Dunn's house, under guard o' Confeds, an' 't ain't no place fer Bill Daniels ter be."

He took one step toward the door, then leaped backward, the knife out, and gleaming in his hand. Standing with back to the entrance, I neither saw nor heard anything, but Jean's face went instantly white, and her fingers convulsively gripped the dresser. Then the knife dropped to the floor, and Daniels's arms were elevated.

"I reckon yer got me," he said, the words sounding odd in the silence. Donald stood in the doorway, his face like that of a statue, the black muzzle of a revolver covering the mountaineer. It was all so swift, so unexpected, that, for the instant, we stood there rigid, actually gasping for breath. I recall the intense hatred in Daniels's eyes, actually turning them black with passion; Jean's attitude of startled amazement; and the almost expressionless countenance of the guerilla chief. He alone seemed cool, self-possessed, and capable of action. His lips smiled.

"I hardly understand the nature of this little gathering," he said slowly, "and it may be I am not welcome, but I am glad to see you, Bill Daniels, and I advise you to keep those hands up until I say otherwise. Jean, what are you doing here? What is the meaning of all this?"

These questions aroused her instantly, the color flooding back into her cheeks. Her first feeling was evidently that of indignation.

"I refuse to answer," she exclaimed, standing erect before him, "until you lower that revolver. Daniels is unarmed, and here to meet me upon a mission of peace."

Donald's face pictured his surprise, but he made no attempt to question her word. I saw his eyes wander from her face to that of the mountaineer; then he shoved the gun back into his belt, and leaned his shoulder against the door.

"Very well, little girl," his tone carelessly good humored. "I have n't exactly the same degree of confi-

dence in this party, but if you hold his parole, it goes with me. You can drop your hands, Daniels, only I advise you not to reach for the knife. Now, Jean, do you mind explaining the meaning of all this?"

That Daniels would have run for it if he dared was plainly evident. I saw him glance toward the windows, and then into Donald's face, his feet moving nervously. But the chance was too small, and his eyes fell to the carpet in dogged helplessness. I moved back, leaving the girl standing next to him.

"Then first answer me one question: Did you know Daniels's cabin on Lost Creek had been destroyed?"

The Colonel's face sobered.

"I did not."

"Have any of your men been that way lately?"

"Not for several weeks under any orders from me. There may have been foraging parties covering that territory, but no report has reached me of any trouble."

"You have heard nothing regarding the disappearance of this man's wife and children?"

"I certainly have not, Jean," now replying with the earnestness of conviction. "Surely you do not suspect me of making war on the helpless?"

"No," gravely, "but our mountain feuds are heartless, and mercy has never been part of the code. Knowing what I do of the past, I cannot blame Daniels for his suspicions. Now listen, and I will explain this situation. Daniels discovered last night that his home had been burned to the ground, and could gain no information relative to the whereabouts of his wife and children.

In despair, and, naturally enough, believing some of our faction must have been concerned in the outrage, he came here, stealing in through the tunnel. He chanced to meet first with Lieutenant King, and learned of the mysterious woman who has been doing such horrible things in this house. His first thought was that it might be his wife, crazed by her sufferings and seeking vengeance. Discovering that I had seen this strange woman's face, and knowing that I had also met his wife, he was persuaded to come here and talk to me, in hope of learning the truth. It was a brave act, and proves the loyalty of the man's heart. I have given him no pledge of safety, but I do now: he is going from here unharmed, on my word of honor."

Donald stepped aside, leaving the door partially open and unguarded; his eyes were no longer on the mountaineer, but upon the face of the girl.

"I respect his purpose, and your implied pledge," he said gravely. "Was the woman Mrs. Daniels?"

"No," her eyes falling before his gaze, and the whole expression of her face softening. "It was a face I had never seen before."

For a long moment no one of us spoke, the silence impressive, the very air seemingly charged with possibilities of evil. I could perceive the doubt in Daniels's face, the vague suspicion of treachery. Before he could move, however, the girl, excited under the strain, broke forth impulsively.

"I — I don't want this to go on! There has been blood enough shed in these mountains over a forgotten

quarrel. Won't you men stop it? For the sake of that woman, those children, homeless, won't you forget the past, and unite together in one cause? I ask it as a woman."

The thought was utterly beyond Daniels. I could see this in the steely glint of the eyes fastened on Donald; but the latter saw only the girl pleading, his face reflecting her mood.

"I am not a brute, Jean," he said finally, "and I have fought because I was born into it, rather than from choice. If Daniels will meet me half way, it shall be truce between us."

He turned his head to look at the other standing gaunt and grim, a bit of sunshine touching the grizzled hair.

"What shall it be, Daniels, peace or war?"

The silence of the mountaineer burst under the stress of pent-up passion, as if some dam had given way, his words tumbling over one another in torrent.

"Ye want me ter lie down now, do ye? Well, damn ye, I won't; maybe if I was on top like you-uns I'd talk 'bout peace, an' fergiveness, an' thet sorter thing. Thet 's easy 'nough when everything goes yer way. But look at my side! You've got ther cinch since this yere war come; yer damn courts drove me out, an' yer guerillas hev raised hell from end ter end o' this region. A Daniels can't live yere any more; yer hell hounds hev burned an' killed an' stole till thar 's nobody left ter fight ye. Thet ain't no time ter ask me ter quit. I did n't come yere ter talk ter ye, Jem Donald. I'll fight ye any

day ye ever saw, but I'm goin' ter die hatin' ye. I don't want ter be no friend. I come yere ter ask ther gal a question, an' now I'm goin'. I reckon yer kin kill me first if yer want ter, fer I ain't got a weapon on me, but I'm sure goin' out thet door dead or alive."

I saw Donald take one step backward, his lips compressed, his hand falling to the butt of his revolver. Jean swept between us, her fingers clasping his arm, and then Daniels walked out, not a muscle of his grim face acknowledging our presence.

CHAPTER XXXI

OUR PLANS MISCARRY

THE gaunt, stoop-shouldered figure disappeared, and no one of us moved or spoke. Donald's lips were sternly set, his eyes burning, but Jean clung to him, her pleading face upturned. Then his fingers released their grip on the revolver butt, and his glance shifted to me, a slight smile breaking the grimness of his expression.

"Pleasant disposition, King," he said easily, and I jealously noted how his hand lifted, and rested tenderly on the girl's hair. "Really it would have been rather a pleasure to shoot the fellow, but I have never been favorably inclined toward murder; besides, the lassie here seems to be going over to his side."

"You know that is not so," she burst forth indignantly, drawing back from him. "I have as much to forgive as you, but have grown ashamed of such savagery. To his side! I am a friend to Lieutenant King, but does that mean I am disloyal to my country?"

Donald caught the girl's uplifted hand, the slight sarcastic smile vanishing from his lips.

"No, no, Jean," he insisted, "my words were a jest. I understand your position, and sympathize with it. But what can one do with that surly, revengeful brute?

The only thing he can appreciate is hard blows. But I shall not follow him, or seek to perpetuate this quarrel. The war is giving me sufficient fighting without pursuing this poor devil any longer. I'll defend myself, Jean girl, and surely you would wish me to do that?"

She was looking up at him, clinging to his hand.

"Yes, I expect that. All I ask is that you let him go, and that you make no effort to do further injury. As he says, you have won; there is hardly a Daniels left to continue the feud. Now we can afford to forgive and forget. And you will; I know you will!"

There was a moment's silence, his hands clasping her fingers, his grave eyes upon her face.

"Will it make you glad to have my promise, little girl?"

"It surely will."

"Then I give it to you; no act of mine shall ever perpetuate the feud."

"You truly know nothing of Daniels's wife and children, or the burning of his cabin?"

"Nothing; but I am going now to find out."

"What brought you back so soon? You were not to return until night."

"My plans were disarranged by the news of a foraging party at work east of Lost Mountain. I sent Theilen that way to intercept their return, and rode back here myself, because, for the time, I had nothing better to do." He turned toward me. "Naturally I had supposed Lieutenant King gone before this."

"I appreciate your generosity," I said, but not so heartily as I had intended, the suspicion coming to me that, perhaps, he was only too delighted to get me away from the girl so easily, "and I should have disappeared more promptly, but for the reappearance of that crazy creature, and my fear of leaving Miss Jean unprotected. If the same arrangements exist, I will now say good-bye to you both."

"Not quite so swiftly," his voice pleasant, yet with a touch of command in it. "You forget I am in the Confederate service, an irregular, it is true, and yet amenable to discipline. I like you, King, and you have served both myself and the lass well on several occasions. I wish to repay her debt, as well as my own, but, at the same time, feel no desire to face a court martial. Give me ten minutes first, and then the coast will be clear."

He bent down, kissed her tenderly, and faced me with extended hand. There was a lump in my throat which would not permit speech, yet I returned his firm clasp. He was a fine fellow; I could envy him, but I could neither dislike nor quarrel. Had it been Dunn I should have refused to accept freedom from him, but I understood Donald's motives, and respected the man.

"All right, old fellow, best of luck," he continued heartily. "Good-bye, Jean girl," and was gone.

Without word or glance, she moved across to the open window, holding aside the drapery of curtain while she gazed without. Apparently I was not in her thought, and she was watching for him, her head bent forward

so as to see the front of the house. I heard the crunch of gravel under a horse's hoofs, saw her wave her hand. Then her face was turned toward me.

"Lieutenant King, you may watch with me," she said, smilingly. I came slowly across the room, scarcely realizing why I should prove obedient, and yet unable to resist her invitation. She held aside the curtain with one white hand, the gentle breeze blowing her hair. Together we watched the horseman riding swiftly across the field. Just before he disappeared he glanced back, and waved his hand. Then the girl turned, and smiled into my face.

"Do you like him, Lieutenant?" she questioned simply.

"He has certainly given me every reason for respect. If we had met under other circumstances I should have valued his friendship highly."

"I am so glad to hear you say that. To me he is the noblest man living, and I want you to think so."

"Surely," I protested, a little surprised, "you did not suppose I would dislike him because he had come into your heart in advance of me?"

"Oh, no," the blood flooding her cheeks. "You are not one to harbor such prejudice, but I am going to think of you as a friend, and I want you really to care for those whom I care for. I have already emerged that far from sectional narrowness, Lieutenant. I can call a Yankee 'friend.' Is n't it almost a miracle? You can never know how bitter I have been; how intensely I have despised everything Northern. Somehow, you

have taken that away from me, and I can never again feel the same toward those on the other side. I — I will always remember you."

It was not that the words of confession meant so much, but the girl's manner, coupled with this unexpected change in sentiment, seemed instantly to alter our entire relationship. She still stood, holding aside the curtain, her eyes downcast, her cheeks flushed. One hand was unoccupied, and I clasped it within my own.

"Don't," she said, almost pleadingly, yet making no effort to draw away; "you must not misunderstand. You are going away now; you must go at once. It is not probable we shall ever meet again, only we are never to be enemies any more, not even in thought. I do want you to know that."

"I thank you for that little, Miss Jean."

"It is not little," and she lifted her eyes to mine, almost indignantly. "It is a great deal. I would not say to many even what I have said to you, and my life has been lived under conditions which enable me to trust few. I trust you; I — I even think I care for you; I — I wish to recall you in memory as a friend; but, of course, you understand, that is all."

"All?"

"Yes; you are going away now; it is best so. My life is here in the South with my people. This war will be over some day, and courts reëstablished. I do not know, Lieutenant King, whether I am legally your wife or not, but if I am those courts will divorce me. I shall endeavor to get notice to you, so you will also realize

your complete freedom. You expect me to do this?"

"I suppose I do," regretfully; "but I would make any sacrifice to have it otherwise."

She was looking directly at me, her hand still in mine, her eyes gravely questioning.

"Do you really mean that? — really mean all you said to me before?"

"As God is my witness, Jean," I insisted soberly, "I do mean every word of it — I love you, earnestly, devotedly. There can be no evil in my saying this, even although I know the impossibility of your making any return. I can take no advantage of the relation between us; I claim no right to you, but I do confess my love, and I want you to know the truth. You cannot think less kindly of me for that?"

"No," the blue-gray of her eyes misty, her lips tremulous. "I — I am afraid I am so selfish as to be almost glad. Not — not that I wish you to love me; but — but it is someway a pleasure to know you care."

"Do you really mean —"

"Oh, no! don't take it that way. I ought not to have said this; I hardly know what I have said. All our acquaintance has been so strange as to leave me confused. I do like you, Lieutenant King, and I find it hard to part, yet nothing else is possible. You must go, and go at once, before the guard is changed. I pray you do not delay, do not linger here longer. I can say no more than I have said already; and your safety depends on departure at once."

It required all my power of will to comply, yet there

was no doubting the earnestness of her plea, and I released the hand, feeling a last slight pressure of the fingers. Her eyes uplifted to mine, a yearning in their depths which seemed to intoxicate, craze me. The next instant she was fairly crushed in my arms, and my lips pressed against hers. It was over almost as quickly, and she had pressed me back from her, sinking into the nearest chair, her hands pressed against her burning cheeks.

"Oh, how could you? Now, now, you must go."

"But you forgive me, Jean? You forgive me?"

"Forgive you! It was more my fault than yours. Why do you make it all so hard for me? Don't you understand I cannot, cannot permit this? You are risking your life here. Go — go at once, for my sake, if you will not for your own."

I do not clearly remember what I did, for I seemed dazed, my brain inoperative, but I know I knelt and kissed her hand, and then backed from the room, my eyes upon her to the last. Outside, in the deserted hall, I came back to reality as though awakened by some shock, every detail of my situation flashing to my brain. I stood still listening — there was no sound from within the room I had just left, but I could hear some one tramping back and forth below. I peered over the balusters, discovering O'Brien nervously pacing from wall to wall, his eyes on the stairs.

"All clear?" I asked softly.

"Bedad, it is now, sor, but the relief will be here in foive minutes."

I slipped down the stairs, aroused and alert, determined to make of value every remaining moment. O'Brien, his carbine grasped in one hand, opened the door silently, and I took one quick glance without. The porch and the walk below appeared deserted.

"Where are the horses?"

"Toied to the rail at the north end of the porch."

"Good choice; there are but few windows on that side. Give me your revolver. Have you cartridges?"

"Half a pocketful, sor."

We crept forth, closing the door behind us, and stole along under cover of the rail to the north steps, which led down to the carriage way. The two horses snorted and drew back, startled by our sudden appearance. I had my grip on the rein of the big roan, when O'Brien, who had stepped further out to unfasten the other animal, uttered a sudden exclamation of alarm. I sprang back to where I could see what he was staring at down the roadway. A troop of horsemen were emerging from a ravine to the left, and trotting toward the open gate. A glance told me they were Confederates, and that they were spreading out, fan-fashion, so as to surround the house. Already any attempt to escape by riding would be useless. There was but one open road, to dodge around the house, and seek some hiding-place among the shrubbery to the south. I gripped the dazed O'Brien by the arm, dragging him back behind the horses.

"Run for it, lad; around the porch, and into the grape arbor."

We were not thirty feet in advance of those spurring

troopers. The first two rounding the house corner saw us, but, before they could throw forward their carbines, we had plunged into the shadow of the vines, running recklessly. A shot or two, fired without aim, only served to increase our pace, our only hope being to cross the orchard before others attained the rear of the house. Beyond that point the weeds offered concealment.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE FIGHT IN THE CABIN

HAD we been given a minute more we would have made it. Running almost shoulder to shoulder, recklessly, not even pausing to glance backward, we were within a hundred feet of the weeds, when horsemen swept about the end of the big tobacco barn, firing as they came, and spurring their mounts desperately in an attempt to head us off. The impossibility of escape in that direction was instantly evident; capture seemed inevitable, yet the sound of those spitting carbines merely served to inspire me with the spirit of resistance. Undoubtedly the end would prove the same, but I meant to fight it out, to do all the damage possible.

"The first cabin, O'Brien! we can make that before they turn."

It was nip and tuck, the surprised troopers wheeling their horses as though on pivots, and digging in the spurs in a mad endeavor to get between us and our haven. O'Brien fell once, tripped, or shot, I know not, but was instantly upon his feet again. I was first over the threshold, stumbling as I made it, and falling forward on the puncheon floor. A rain of bullets crashed into the opposite wall, and, as I struggled to my knees, I caught a glimpse of the circling horsemen without, and of

O'Brien crouching beside the door, his carbine working viciously. It was all instantaneous, and I rolled over, kicked the heavy oaken door shut, and dropped the bar into its socket. There was little doubt as to the end; but now, at least, we had a breathing spell, a few moments of protection. A quick glance about gave me a plan of defence.

"That 's a double door, O'Brien; loosen the upper half, and use your gun through the opening. Keep down so they can't get you. I'll dig a hole between the logs on the other side."

I turned, fishing a knife out of my pocket. It was a single-room cabin, its only window boarded up, so very little light found entrance. A few pieces of rude furniture were jumbled up at the farther end, but I barely noticed these, for, with my first step, I came face to face with a woman, fronting me with gun in hand. She was tall, angular, poorly dressed, her features sharp, her hair a wisp, her eyes burning into mine. The encounter was so sudden and unexpected that I recoiled, dropping my knife, and gripping at the revolver.

"Who be yer — Yanks?" The question seemed to come from between clinched teeth.

"Yes," I acknowledged, realizing the uselessness of denial. "Who are you?"

"It don't make no difference who we-uns be. Who 's them fellers after yer?"

"Rebs, of course."

"Donald's outfit?"

"I expect so — either his guerillas, or Dunn's Cavalry."

"Thin ye kin count us in, Yank. Git out, Daniel, an' kiver thet winder."

A boy of thirteen, sallow and thin, with stooped shoulders, but firm-set jaw, crawled out from the bed, and, long rifle in hand, clambered up to where he could peer through between the boards. Quickly he pushed the brown barrel out, sighted along it, and pulled the trigger.

"Thet 's one of 'em, ma," he said rather wearily, expectorating tobacco juice on the floor.

"Keep 'em a movin', Daniel. Benjamin, whar be ye?"

"Yere, ma."

"Wal, git out 'long with thet jigger et ther door. Gol dern yer, move!"

She caught him by one ear, a younger edition of the same lanky type, and landed him in the centre of the floor, where he stood rubbing his head with one hand, but clinging to a gun with the other. The woman's disgust burst all control.

"Wake up, you!" and she cuffed him. "Benjamin Daniels, ef I hev ter speak agin thar 's goin' ter be trouble."

Rubbing his eyes with the sleeve of his shirt, the lad shuffled over toward O'Brien. His head barely topped the closed half of the door, across which he shoved his rifle barrel. I began to understand the sit-

uation, to appreciate these new recruits. Woman and children then had been brought up in the atmosphere of war, and were not to be despised as allies.

"You are Maria Daniels, I imagine?"

"I reckon I am, stranger," one hand on her hip, and chin advanced. "Do yer know Bill?"

"Yes, he belongs to my command; that 's his scouting partner yonder."

"Thet red-headed little whiffet?"

I nodded, wondering at the sudden silence without.

"Say, Mister," she burst forth, "whar is Bill? We-uns ain't got no house no more, fer it 's burnt down. One o' the Talcott boys said Bill was over this-a-way, an' so we hoofed it yere las' night, but I ain't seen nary thing but Johnnies since, till yer two hellions bust in. If Bill be 'round these yere parts he better be lookin' after me an' ther kids, or thar 's a right smart chance o' his losin' us."

"Your husband is in the neighborhood somewhere, Mrs. Daniels," I hastened to say, eager to get busy on the defence of the cabin. "I saw him less than half an hour ago in the house yonder. He left by way of a secret passage. He had heard of your plight, and was seeking you. He even went to Donald to learn the truth."

"Bill did? Ter Jem Donald? Stranger, ye're a blame liar!"

I stepped back, the fierceness of her face startling me.

"But, Mrs. Daniels —"

"They're a-coomin', sor!" sang out O'Brien, and

there was a sharp barking of guns, the cabin filling with powder smoke. What followed was all confusion, only here and there a distinct impression remaining on my memory. I was at the door with one leap, staring out, revolver in hand. Men were running toward us on foot, yelling and firing as they came. Amid the smoke clouds I could distinguish their forms, but not their faces, yet, directly in front, were a number bunched together, and bearing, slung between them, a huge timber. Their purpose was evident: here was the battering-ram to break down the door; one blow from this would render further defence impossible.

"Those fellows with the log!" I cried. "Drop them! never mind the others."

We poured a volley directly into the bunch, and three fell, the front end of the timber striking the ground. From every side the fire aimed at the cabin converged to the opening where we stood. Bullets crashed into the lower half of the door, and whistled past us to find lodgment in the further wall. O'Brien swore, and went stumbling backward; Daniels's youngest had a livid mark across his forehead and sank to the floor, his face in his hands. Maria grabbed his gun and let drive beside me. I could hear the deep barks of the older lad's rifle through the crack in the window. To attempt resisting the force attacking us was madness; but, back beyond the halted rammers, I caught a glimpse of Dunn, urging the men forward. The sight of the fellow robbed me of all judgment, left me reckless and desperate. He was beyond range of my revolver, but I emptied it into the

faces of those nearer. For the moment our concentrated fire staggered them, but there were too many out there to be held back long by so small a force. As we exhausted our loads, they sprang confidently forward, a dozen flinging aside their guns to grasp anew the fallen timber. Then, with a yell, they rushed us. Only half ready we fired blindly, scarcely able to see through the smoke. With a crash the end of the timber struck, splintering the boards and tearing the lower half of the door from its fastenings.

The woman was flung backward, her rifle discharging as she fell, and I sprang aside, tripping over the boy, and striking against something which rendered me for the instant helpless. Yet I managed to reach my knees, and fired twice at the dim figures leaping toward me through the smoke: then I went down, grappled by a dozen hands, but struggling desperately until pinned to the floor.

The hubbub ceased, the roar and shouting, the rattle of guns: the smoke blew out of the door in a cloud, and, although my eyes smarted painfully, I could yet perceive my surroundings. The elder Daniels boy was backed into a corner, the black muzzle of a gun at his breast; the younger lay on the floor apparently unconscious; O'Brien was just getting up, his clothes in rags from the fierce struggle, while Maria sat on the bed, gun still in hand, glaring about her, but without a shot left. A fellow struck my arm a numbing blow causing the revolver to drop to the floor. I had seen nothing of Dunn during that fierce rush, but now he stood

fronting me, sword in hand, and eyes gleaming in triumph.

"Surrender, you dirty Yankee spy," he shouted. "We've got you this time."

In my excitement I laughed at the fellow, despising the cowardice of his words, and scarcely realizing the power he possessed.

"All right, Lieutenant," I returned, holding out my hands, "this happens to be your turn."

"Yes, it is, and I know how to take it. You'll not have another chance to get away. Munn, you and Corbett tie that fellow. He 's caught red-handed, and it won't require even a court martial to condemn him."

The two cavalrymen strapped me up, until I lay like a log on the floor, yet the full significance of this did not burst upon me until their work had been accomplished, and I again caught sight of Dunn's face.

"What does this mean?" I insisted indignantly. "Am I not to be treated as a prisoner of war?"

"You'll be treated for what you are. You've done the work of a spy, and you end as a spy."

"But I am not one, and you know it. I came here as a scout in uniform. I have made no attempt whatever to assume disguise: I am in uniform now."

He laughed sneeringly, turning contemptuously away.

"That might be accepted at headquarters if you ever got there, King, but I mean to see you don't have any opportunity to escape so easily. You've had your turn: now it 's mine."

I shut my teeth tightly, not even yet believing him in

earnest, but feeling the utter uselessness of resistance. If he was the senior officer present, as was quite probable, he, at least, possessed power to carry out his threat, and it would be an act of supreme foolishness to anger him further. That he was by disposition mean, spiteful, and cowardly I had ample reason to know; now he possessed means for revenge without danger to himself.

"Lieutenant Dunn," I called after him, "I might think you in earnest if you were not a soldier, but I cannot believe this of a Confederate officer. As you say, I have had my turn, and now it is yours, but surely, I have acted honorably, and have reason to expect the same honorable treatment from you."

He stood facing me, his lips parted so as to exhibit a row of teeth beneath the black moustache.

"Connors," he said sharply, making no pretence at replying to me, "any prisoners badly hurt?"

The man addressed, a Sergeant, straightened up from where he knelt on the floor.

"Only this boy, sir; I think he 's got a fracture of the skull."

"Have them all put into the next cabin, and let Franklin dress their wounds; he knows something about surgery. Keep that fellow here under strong guard, and watch over him yourself. He 's a Yankee spy, Connors, and we'll not trouble to take him back to camp."

Without even looking at me, he passed out through the door, and I lay there on my side, watching the Sergeant oversee the removal of the others. Maria and the older boy were apparently unhurt, but O'Brien had to

be supported by two of the men, while the younger lad was swung in a blanket. After they had disappeared, five troopers remained, lounging in the doorway, with guns in hand, and the Sergeant took time to come over and examine my fastenings. He was a sturdy-looking fellow, with a coarse face, but rather pleasant eyes.

"Your Lieutenant is something of a joker, is n't he?" I questioned, still doubting the earnestness of the threat.

"Not that ever I heard about," he returned gruffly, "I've suspected him of most everything else, but never of that."

"You mean he really intends to hang me?"

"I reckon he does."

"But see here, Sergeant, I am no spy. I am here in uniform, and have fought you face to face. Surely you men will never take part in such a deed?"

He spat into one corner of the cabin, his face expressionless.

"We all are soldiers," he replied finally, "an' I reckon what the Lieutenant says goes. Far as I'm consarned, stranger, a Yank 's a Yank, and I'm willin' ter string 'em all up, if them 's the orders. The boys mostly feels like that. If the Lieutenant is in airnest, an' I reckon he is, ye better be gittin' that last will an' testament o' yours fixed up, fer we're due back in camp by nightfall."

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE AVOWAL

THEY set me up where I could lean against the bed, my hands and feet strapped securely, my limbs numb from the tightness of the fastenings. The Sergeant sat opposite me in a chair tilted against the wall, his eyes partially closed, but his jaws busy on the tobacco in his cheek, the guard blocking the doorway. Through the opening I could obtain a glimpse of the field without golden in the sunshine. The full terror of my situation dawned slowly upon me. I was not in the hands of an honorable soldier, but of a cowardly cur seeking revenge. Dunn had reason to hate me — greater reason perhaps than he knew, and sufficient certainly to make him anxious to get me out of the way for all time. Now he had the opportunity, and every instinct of his nature would conspire to that end. He might not be aware of Jean's real love for Donald, but he did know of the form of marriage between us, and had every reason to believe that the intimacy of the past few days had created a friendship dangerous to his ambition. My rough treatment of him would never have led to such reprisal as compassing my death as a spy; there must be another cause, and that cause was Jean Denslow. With me re-

moved, he imagined his way would be clear, and was willing even to venture murder — for my death would be no less — to obtain this result. Fighting against it, I yet became more and more convinced that his threat was not an idle one. He had the power and the disposition to carry it out.

And what had I to hope for? Any plea would be useless; any threat on my part laughed at. Donald might return; a Federal scouting party might ride that way, yet neither of these contingencies was probable. Daniels was free, and possibly even knew of my predicament, but could accomplish nothing alone, and I had no knowledge of him since his disappearance into the tunnel. The utter helplessness of my situation was only too evident. If Dunn dared to carry out his threat, and was expeditious about it, nothing short of a miracle could save me, and I had no expectation of a miracle. All these thoughts came to me in brief time, for I doubt if the Lieutenant was absent more than twenty minutes. It seemed to me then even less than that, and I was yet sitting there motionless, gazing out of the open door, but seeing nothing, when he stepped in between the guard, and stood still staring at me.

"King," he questioned peremptorily, "is there any truth in what I have just heard, that those murders in the house were committed by a woman?"

"Yes," I said, surprised at the emotion in his voice; "I saw her."

"You saw her! What was she like?"

"A thin, haggard face, with wild eyes, and straggly gray hair. Did Miss Denslow tell you? She saw her also."

"I have n't seen the lady," his voice grown petulant, "nor been to the house. A negro told me." He stopped, gaining control of himself with an effort. "But I'll see to that later. Do you know what I'm going to do with you?"

"I know what you threaten."

"And what I threaten I carry out: I am going to hang you to that tree yonder as a Yankee spy."

I hated and despised the fellow so thoroughly that I never moved a muscle, except to smile in his face.

"That will be a brave deed, Lieutenant Dunn, but one you are no doubt capable of."

"You question my courage? You think I will not dare?"

"My thought of you is of no interest," I returned, for the instant losing temper in face of the man's conceit. "You possess power, and it requires no courage to command your men to hang me on a false charge. But there is one thing you did not dare do — confess your purpose to Jean Denslow."

"This has nothing to do with her. Oh, I know the trick you played on the girl, and believe she will rejoice to be thus easily rid of you. You may not be a spy, but you have done a spy's work and are going to meet a spy's fate. Have you any message to leave?"

"None; and if I had, I would not trust you with it."

His white teeth gleamed beneath his moustache.

"Perhaps I might fail as a messenger," he admitted, assured of his position, "and as we are in a hurry to return to camp this pleasant duty can be attended to at once. I don't think I ever hated anybody worse than I do you, King, and the Lord has been good to me for once. Connors!"

The Sergeant who had been watching us through half closed eyes, rose to his feet, and saluted.

"Here, sir."

"You enlisted from this section, I understand. This Yank here has been riding the country with Bill Daniels, and up to all kinds of deviltry. There 's no use taking that kind prisoner, and I reckon you know your business."

The Sergeant grinned, looking me over coolly. Dunn evidently knew his man, for he snapped out his orders sharply.

"Unstrap his legs and get him on his feet. Take the fellow's jacket off; the collar is too high. Here Munn, you and Franklin hold him by the arms. That 's right, men; outside with him. We'll give the lad another look at the sunshine."

They were grimly in earnest, holding me roughly, and forcing me forward through the door. I saw the back of the house a hundred yards away, most of the troop of cavalrymen lounging beside the well. The majority remained where they were, staring curiously at us, but a half-dozen got upon their feet, and strolled in our direction. Scarcely knowing what I did, yet obeying the pressure on either side, I advanced until jerked to a halt.

Before me dangled a rope with a noose at the end. I heard a bird singing on the branch above, yet I saw nothing but a maze of faces, and that dangling noose, which was intended to choke out my life. For the instant I reeled giddily, held erect only by the grip on either arm, a strange red mist before my eyes. This then was the end — the end of all ambition, of all life, of all love. I seemed unable to grasp the thought, and yet earth and sky were but misty unrealities, the sharp voice of Dunn indistinct. Some one struck me, and the blow broke the spell. I looked into Connors's face: then beyond him into the eyes of Dunn.

"You infernal cur!" I said coldly, "if you think this wins you the woman, you'll learn your mistake."

An oath broke from his lips, but the stockily built Sergeant stood between us. Then a hand reached over my shoulder, grasped the rope, and I felt the noose settle about my neck and tighten. The touch of the hemp sent a chill to the heart, but I stood firm, my eyes still on Dunn's. The fellow should read no fear in my face; nor would I ask mercy of him.

I know not from whence she came, or how. In that first second I thought it a dream, a vision, but there was no doubting the voice or the words.

"What are you doing? What does this mean?"

Apparently as startled at her unexpected appearance as I, the Lieutenant failed to answer. Besides, she ignored him, looking directly at the Sergeant, and the latter stammered an explanation.

"We were goin' to hang a spy, ma'am."

"A spy! This man is no spy. Lieutenant Dunn, answer me; you are in command here — is this jest or earnest?"

Thus forced by her insistence, the fellow assumed a swagger of authority.

"This is a military matter," he began roughly, "and no affair of yours whatever, Jean. I will not brook your interference. This man has penetrated our lines. He has taken information derived as a spy to Federal headquarters. In ordering his execution I am doing no more than any other officer would."

She looked directly into his face, her clear eyes reading the truth behind his words. Suddenly she turned, grasped the rope, and lifted the noose over my head.

"That is my answer," she said quietly. "You shall not hang this man: he is not a spy: he is not here as a spy — he is my husband."

Whatever veneer of gentleness Calvert Dunn might assume on occasion was gone now. With reddened face, and blazing eyes, he sprang forward, grasped her arm, and flung her aside, so fiercely that she fell upon one knee.

"Your husband!" he shouted, fairly beside himself with rage, "yes, by a trick; a dirty, contemptible, Yankee trick. Now I'll play another, and divorce you."

I saw only the girl's face, as she staggered to her feet. It was white, the lips firm set, the eyes burning.

"I have not said I desired a divorce."

"Well, I do, and I'm going to hang this man. You can stay and see the job done, or you can leave, just as you please. Connors, replace that rope!"

I saw a quick movement of the girl's hand, an outstretched arm, the glitter of a steel barrel.

"Lieutenant Dunn," she said, her voice without a tremor, "I am a woman, but you are going to listen to me. If you move, or one of your men puts hand on the prisoner, I shall fire. You know whether or not I can shoot. This man is not a spy, and no military court would ever condemn him. You are seeking personal revenge, because he took your place and married me. It was a trick: I have never held it a legal ceremony, but now you force me to do so. I acknowledge this man as my husband; I acknowledge myself as his wife; and I dare you to lay violent hands upon him."

"You think that revolver will prevent," he sneered. "With one word my men would overpower you."

"Not before I could pull this trigger. But there is still another reason — Colonel Donald is now riding in through the gate. Within two more minutes he will be here. He knows Lieutenant King." Her hand dropped to her side, and her lips smiled. "Now, if you wish to, show your authority."

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE DISCOVERY OF DANIELS

ALL Dunn's pretended bravado seemed to desert him at these words, and I saw Corbett grin, as he watched the indecision in his officer's face.

"Shall we string the Yank up, sir?" he asked, endeavoring to speak with outward respect.

The other did not answer. He was listening to the hoof-beats of horses advancing around the north side of the house. Suddenly Donald trotted into the midst of the group, two men behind him, and drew rein sharply. His eyes swept over the faces, and the dangling rope.

"What is the meaning of this?" he questioned. "Jean, what are you doing here? Dunn, I should like some explanation of this."

"I am not under your orders," growled the Lieutenant, in a last effort at independence. "I belong to the regular service."

Donald leaned forward and looked at the man contemptuously.

"Which you continually manage to disgrace," he said coldly. "But we'll not discuss either rank or authority. Lieutenant King, what did these fellows propose to do with you?"

"Hang me as a spy," I answered, with a shiver. "It

would have been over with me by now, but for the heroism of Miss Denslow."

I saw the man's lips close firmly, as he glanced from her face to mine, and then at the perturbed countenance of Dunn. Was he jealous also? Would Jean's interference on my behalf make him indifferent to my safety? His decision was too prompt to give me much opportunity for speculation.

"Lieutenant Dunn," he said tersely, "it 's perfectly true that I have no authority over you in the service, but I think you know what it means to oppose me now. Irregular though I am, a word from me to General Johnston relative to this matter will bring you face to face with a court martial. This prisoner is not a spy, and has never acted in that capacity. You were thoroughly aware of that fact."

"Then I hold him as prisoner of war. Take charge of him, Connors."

"Wait!" the single word rang out like a shot, and the Sergeant stopped instantly, unable to decide whom he had better obey. "He is not your prisoner, Dunn, but mine. If a man of you lays hands on him again, you shall answer for it to me."

"Your prisoner! My God, how? We captured him in fight. That fellow cost us six men."

Donald flung one booted leg over the pommel of his saddle, and calmly rested a revolver along it, his gaze on the excited faces.

"I am very sorry for that, Lieutenant," he admitted quietly, "but you should have let him alone. Most men

fight when driven to it. King was my prisoner, and on parole, when you attacked him. I have special authority to parole prisoners whom I cannot send into headquarters. Lieutenant King is my prisoner, and I propose to hold him, by power of this,"—he touched the deadly black barrel resting in his right hand, and smiled. No one spoke; the men stood shuffling uneasily and waiting for their officer to take the initiative. Donald glanced at Jean, perfectly cool, and alert to every movement about him.

"Fennel, dismount and untie Lieutenant King's hands."

The man accomplished this with apparent utter indifference to the scowling faces and growls of the men crowding about him, and I stretched out my arms, aching painfully from the tight cords. Donald realized the danger of the moment, the disinclination of the regulars to yield to his dictation; but they were without leadership, and he held the whip hand, confident that Dunn would never venture open fight.

"That 's all," swinging back into the saddle, but with his revolver still in hand. "Fennel, you and Watts ride with the prisoner between you. Jean, you had better return to the house. Lieutenant Dunn, I came back here especially to have word with you upon another matter. I shall expect you in the library in ten minutes."

He held his horse so as to block any attempt at rescue, waiting motionless until we were quite clear of the crowd, then following at a slow walk well to our rear. There was an outburst of profanity, a shaking of car-

bines, a jostling of bodies, but no one led; and the guerilla rode away, smiling as he looked backward.

At the front door he dismounted, and, leaving his two men on guard at the steps, motioned me to follow him within, Jean having disappeared in advance.

"I expect no more trouble from those fellows, King," he said pausing in the hall to face me. "They naturally dislike me, and it rather goes against the grain to take orders from me; but they have n't any confidence in their own officer, and are not certain they have any right to hang you. Dunn will come here to see me first, and I have that to tell him which will give him something new to think about."

"I am most grateful for what you have done," I interposed as he paused, "but I should like to know what you propose doing with me, and the others."

"What others?"

"Those taken with me in the fight yonder — one of my scouts, O'Brien, Mrs. Daniels, and two boys, the younger severely wounded."

"Maria Daniels! She is here then! I will have them seen to at once. As to you, King, I shall keep to my word, and send you back to the Federal lines. But you have been mixed up in this strange affair here, and I want you to see the end of it. We are, I believe, on the verge of clearing up the mystery. Go into the library and wait. I want a moment's conversation with Jean, and will then join you."

The shades were drawn, and the library full of shadows. I sat down facing the table where Judge Dunn

died, and in the silence, my mind insensibly began to review those swiftly recurring events of the past few days. It seemed to me I had lived years since first coming to this house — years full of violence, death, danger, and excitement. And how greatly was I indebted to Donald, and to Jean! He had gone to her — eager to be with her even for a moment. I wondered if she would confess to him now the story of our relationship. If she did, if she told him all, how would he greet me upon his return? It must have cost her much to make that open avowal before Dunn and his men: she was driven to it by hope of saving my life. But it would be harder yet to confess the truth to Donald.

I had gone no further in my thought, when he came in, crossing the room, and lifting the shades before speaking. There was nothing in his face to give me uneasiness, and he looked me in the eyes smilingly, sitting down with his back to the window.

"I am picking up the ends of a rather tangled skein, King," he said easily, "but little by little it is straightening out. After I talk with Dunn I hope to know what to do. The fellow ought to be here by this time."

We waited for, perhaps, five minutes in silence, Donald seemingly buried in thought, and I afraid to ask those questions which agitated my brain. He was not a man to exhibit emotion, and I could judge nothing as to how he felt or thought from his words or outward actions. What did he know, suspect, plan? How would the knowledge of my midnight marriage to Jean affect him? What did this coming interview with Dunn por-

tend? We heard the approaching steps of the latter in the hall, and both glanced up quickly. The Lieutenant came in with a distinct swagger, his sword clattering against the door, as he stiffly came to attention. Donald smiled, gazing at him quietly.

"Kindly take that chair, Lieutenant," he said, "and I will detain you for only a moment."

There was a slight pause of hesitation, Dunn sitting on the edge of the chair, ill at ease, his eyes shifting from face to face. He made no objection to my presence, evidently supposing this interview had to do with my capture. Donald broke the silence with a question.

"Is it true, as I have always been led to believe, that your mother died twelve years ago?"

The man's face changed instantly, his hands gripping the arms of the chair.

"My mother! Why — why do you ask that?"

"Because Lucille said something yesterday which aroused my suspicion. I have just returned from Bartonville; the records of the asylum show she was taken away from there, uncured, by your father. Is this true?"

"Yes," the voice scarcely audible.

"Did she die later?"

"No."

"Where has she been kept concealed all these years?"

Dunn wet his lips, his hands trembled.

"In the west attic," he admitted at last. "It — it was fitted up, and she has been confined there ever since. It has been our family secret."

However much Donald may have sympathized, his face expressed nothing, and he went coldly on with his questioning.

"Your mother is not now in the west attic; the men who have met their death in this house have been attacked by a woman. Did you know this?"

Dunn rose to his feet trembling.

"Not until a short time ago, Colonel Donald. I have not seen Lucille for several days. A negro told me that the assassin was a woman, and I questioned Lieutenant King as to the truth. From his description I feared it might prove to be my mother. What — what can I do?"

"Go with us in search," and Donald stood erect. "No one in this house is safe until we have her under lock and key again."

Dunn hesitated, glancing questioningly toward me.

"Is it necessary to have this man with us?" he asked.

"I see no reason why he should not be. He already knows the circumstances, and besides is a gentleman to be trusted. It may require the three of us to handle her safely, and I greatly prefer King to any of the men outside."

He crossed the room to the hall, as if the affair were settled, and we followed without exchanging a word or a glance. Much as I despised Dunn, I could not now but feel a certain sympathy for him. Donald led the way up the stairs, and back toward the fireplace. He glanced into the side room, but returned immediately, shaking his head to my look of inquiry.

"We'll try the tunnel, King," he said swiftly. "Lift the andiron. Who do you suppose closed the trap?"

"Jean, probably, for fear some one might notice."

The secret door swung as easily as ever on its pivot, revealing the interior.

"The man never took the lantern," I exclaimed in surprise, straightening up and pointing at the shelf. Our eyes met in understanding; in our minds was the same thought: perhaps just below we were to discover another tragedy.

Donald descended first, after lighting the lantern and throwing the illumination well down the shaft; I followed, with Dunn loitering in the rear. We grouped together at the foot of the ladder, all alike dreading the possibilities of the dark passage. Donald advanced a step or two, holding the lantern high, so as to throw the rays of light forward. There we saw revealed an outstretched hand. We were used to death, death by violence, but this discovery in that place, our nerves already strained to the utmost, came like a shock. It was a ghastly sight, that one white hand showing there in the ray of light. Dunn gave utterance to a single cry of horror, but Donald and I pressed forward silently, determined to know the truth. A dozen steps and we stood beside the body, able at a glance to comprehend the whole story. Daniels, in his old campaign jacket, his hat beside him, his seamed, rugged face upturned, lay dead at our feet, a knife wound in his throat. Just beyond, with head slightly uplifted on a protuberance of rock lay a woman, her slender figure draped in a faded

red wrapper, her gray, straggling locks half concealing her face. Between them was the knife, a thin-bladed, deadly poniard.

The stupefaction of horror gripped us, as we stood staring down at the sight. For a moment no one of us grasped the full meaning of this closing tragedy. Then Donald knelt and touched the bodies.

"Both dead," he said soberly, and looked up at us. "No doubt Daniels died first, from the knife wound, but he must have reached her in the struggle, hurling her down with him. As she fell, her head struck the rock, and the knife dropped from her hand."

Tenderly he pressed back the gray hair, revealing the woman's face. Death had softened its expression, giving a younger look; yet even now it retained the appearance of suffering. A throb of pity came to me as I looked.

"I remember her now," Donald said gravely; "but how the years have changed her! Calvert, she was your mother."

For answer, Dunn dropped upon his knees, and bowed his head over the motionless body.

CHAPTER XXXV

THE CONFESSION

WE bore the bodies out by the way of the cabin entrance, taking them both into the main house. Dunn remained with his mother, thoroughly broken down by this revelation, and Lucille joined him. Donald himself, forgetful of the feud, went to Maria with the news of her husband's death, and brought her and the eldest boy back with him to sit beside the body. There remained nothing for me to do, and, depressed and lonely, I returned to the deserted library, and waited.

I was still a prisoner, and although I might easily have escaped, a sense of honor held me more securely than bonds. I wondered what Donald intended to do with me. Without doubt he understood by now my connection with Jean, and he might not feel so lenient toward me. Where was Jean? Could she be avoiding me, ashamed of her avowal, and fearful lest I should have taken her hasty words seriously? This would not seem true to her nature, and surely she could not so misconstrue my character. Yet Donald might have convinced the girl it was better we should never meet again. The whole game came to me in a flash. Donald had reason to fear Dunn, and not me. My marriage to Jean

Denslow was a service which he was willing to repay. Previous to my appearance the love between these two was hopeless, the girl's father favoring Dunn's suit, and forcing her to immediate marriage. I had blocked that by pure accident. Delay was inevitable, for the form of a divorce would have to be gone through with before Dunn could again claim her. All this was to the advantage of Donald. His only immediate desire would be to get rid of me, leaving him in possession of the field. It was not pleasant to think about; to realize that the girl was being played with in this manner; and that I was utterly helpless. If she cared for me the situation would be different, but my love was of no service while her heart belonged to another. Played with? Beyond question she was part of the play, acting her role at Donald's dictation, as anxious as he was, that I should disappear from the stage.

I had reached this gloomy conclusion when the man himself came in, closing the door behind him, and crossing the room to stand with his back toward me, looking out of the window. Finally he turned and looked at me, his own face in the shadow.

"King," he said gravely, "as a Confederate officer it is no doubt my duty to hold you as a prisoner of war. I suppose that when Dunn recovers from his present shock, and his old nature returns, he will make some sort of report of this matter and endeavor to get me into trouble. The fellow dislikes you cordially, and from all I hear, with good reason. However, what he thinks does n't affect me, and I am going to give you a horse and

safe passage into your own lines — you and your wild Irishman."

"I thank you very much, Colonel Donald," rising to my feet, and speaking rather stiffly.

"Not at all, Lieutenant. I believe I owe you my life, but that counts even less with me than Jean's desire. I have promised your release to her."

I could say nothing, and he went on gravely.

"I have just been given the details of what occurred at Denslow's plantation, and your connection with the affair. It makes a very peculiar story. I had heard it hinted at before, but had no reason to suppose you the man. May I ask, do you propose taking advantage of this situation in any way? My own relations with Jean give me the right to ask this."

"I am aware of that, Colonel Donald, and will answer frankly. I mean to make every amend in my power. I respect and admire Miss Denslow sincerely, and will never stand in the way of her happiness. I pledge you my word to this, and ask your confidence."

"You certainly have that, King," he said heartily. "I feel that I can trust you both. This is an occasion when the Blue and the Gray can clasp hands," and he held out his own. "Your horses are at the steps, and the more promptly you get away the better. It may be we shall never meet again, but I wish your remembrance of me to be a kindly one."

"It could not be otherwise."

We passed out into the hall together, and the light rested on his handsome, genial face. It was indeed easy,

to understand how she had learned to love him. I endeavored to speak, but the words seemed to choke me — I was about to leave behind all my inspiration and hope. At the foot of the stairs he stopped, his hand pressing my arm.

"Jean wishes to speak with you before you go," he said calmly. "She is in the parlor."

Then he turned and walked away, leaving me standing there alone facing the closed door. The blood surged to my face; I could feel the trembling of my fingers as they grasped the knob. I had not expected, not even hoped for this. She was standing waiting me, in the centre of a room full of sunshine — a slender, white-robed figure, with smiling lips and smiling eyes. I stopped irresolute, still grasping the door, wondering what it was I should say to her. Yet she gave me short time for thought.

"I asked Colonel Donald to have you come to me before your departure," she said firmly, "so there might be no misunderstanding between us."

"You refer to the words spoken yonder, Miss Denslow?" and it seemed to me an icy hand gripped my heart. "There was no misunderstanding, I assure you. I realize that what you said was merely to save life; spoken on the spur of the moment."

Her eyes fell, the blood flooding her cheeks.

"It was not that I meant, Lieutenant King, it was something very different. I have not really deceived you, but — but I have permitted you to deceive yourself. I thought I could let you go away without any ex-

planation, but I — I find I cannot, and Colonel Donald thinks I had better confess the truth."

"I hope you also think so."

"Yes, I — I believe I do, only I hardly know how to begin, how to make it all clear. When you told me once that you cared for me, I said that I loved Colonel Donald. You remember that?"

"Yes," eagerly, "was it not true?"

"It was true, but — but not in the way you thought. Listen to me: I wish to tell you a little — just a little — about my own life; then you will understand."

She paused with eyes cast down, her bosom heaving.

"My birth took place fifteen miles east of here on Clear Creek in the mountains. Long before then my family had become involved in a feud which has cost many lives. My father was not of a nature to keep this up, but was compelled to defend himself, and for some years the other side was in the ascendant, and used their power remorselessly. When I was but a child our home was burned to the ground, and my mother, with me in her arms, driven to the mountains. My father was away at the time, and the exposure of the night cost my mother's life."

I could see the tears in her eyes at the memory, yet she continued speaking.

"It seemed as if this loss of his wife temporarily crazed my father. It seemed to change his entire disposition, and he lived only for revenge, and to drive the other faction from this region. For the time he appeared to lose all interest in me, and passed his days and

nights in the mountains with the few he could gather to his cause. I was taken to the home of an aunt, my mother's sister. I must have been a lovable child, for I won her affection, and that of her husband. They insisted upon adopting me as their own; and as my real father had no home, no ambition other than revenge, he consented, and I became legally Jean Denslow. No girl could have had a happier life than mine, or greater kindness and care. But it is true, I love Colonel Donald, for he is my father."

It seemed to me I could not speak, the words rushing to my lips choked me. What could all this mean, this confession, this acknowledgment? In confusion, in eagerness, I succeeded in blurting out,

"But Dunn? You were engaged to Dunn?"

"Yes," her eyes uplifting to mine. "It was the wish of my foster father, and then I knew no better."

"But now? Since then you have learned your mistake? You do not love him?"

"You forget, I am a married woman."

I sprang forward, clasping her hands, a sudden confidence mastering me.

"Jean, tell me the truth — all the truth! What is it your heart says?"

Shall I ever forget what I read in the depths of those blue-gray eyes, or those words in which she answered me?

"I love my husband."

THE END

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